

# IF YOU COME FORWARD TO SERVE

*An Inductive Study of Sirach*

*"My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation."*

**Sirach 2:1 (RSV2CE)**

Twelve Sessions for Young Adults

**Catholic Armory**

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# Using This Guide

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Welcome to Ben Sira's school. This is an inductive study: the group discovers the meaning of the text by reading it together, asking honest questions of it, and following its own words to the answers. The leader guides the discovery; the leader does not lecture.

## What is in each session

Each session has three parts. The Leader Preparation Guide is for you alone, read during the week before you lead: it holds the background, the Voices of the Church, the Catechism connections, the running threads, and your goals and time plan. The Discussion Guide is the script for the night itself: opening prayer, two Win questions to open hearts, numbered Build questions into the text, two Send questions to aim the week, Live It commitments, closing prayer, and a memory verse. The Leader Reference Card lists every passage in the order used, so you can steer without flipping.

## The ANSWER boxes

Every Build question is followed by a shaded ANSWER box marked share after the discussion. Let the group dig first; the box is the destination, not the shortcut. If the group finds more than the box holds, rejoice.

## The threads and the sealed guess

Several threads run across the whole study and resolve at marked sessions. The most important is the sealed guess: in Session 1 every participant writes a private answer to the question Who or what is Wisdom in this book? on their Take-Home sheet, shows no one, and brings it back weekly until the guesses are opened together in Session 8. Protect the seal cheerfully: the payoff is worth it.

## Take-Home sheets

After each session, hand out that session's two-page Take-Home. It carries the night's findings, the Voices of the Church, the Live It commitments, the memory verse, and the reading for next week. It never contains spoilers for future sessions.

## The steelman sessions

Sessions 3, 7, and 12 present the strongest Protestant objections at full strength before answering them from Scripture and the Catechism. This is deliberate: our people will meet these arguments at full strength, and an answer that only beats a weak version of an objection has beaten nothing. Prepare these sessions with extra care.

## Translation and time

All quotations follow the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition (RSV2CE). Note that verse numbering in Sirach varies among Bible editions, especially in chapters 30 through 36; if a reference seems off by a verse or two in another translation, read the surrounding verses. Each session is built for 75 to 90 minutes, and every Leader Preparation Guide names its pre-chosen cuts if the night runs long.

## SESSION 1: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 1: All Wisdom Comes from the Lord

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**Passage:** The Prologue; Sirach 1:1-30

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers that wisdom is not a human achievement but a gift that begins with the fear of the Lord, and meets the real human beings (a grandfather and his grandson) through whom God gave us this book.

**Catholic Touchstone:** The inspiration of Scripture and the Church as the guardian of the canon (CCC 105-108, 120).

#### What You Need to Know

Sirach is unusual among Old Testament books: we know who wrote it, roughly when, and even who translated it. Jesus Ben Sira was a scribe and teacher in Jerusalem around 200 to 175 BC, running what he calls a house of instruction (51:23). His grandson translated the book from Hebrew into Greek in Egypt sometime after 132 BC and tells us so in the Prologue, the only translator's preface in the whole Bible. For centuries the Hebrew original was thought lost, but large portions resurfaced in the Cairo Genizah in 1896 and later at Masada and Qumran, confirming the book was composed in Hebrew and letting scholars compare the Greek with substantial Hebrew witnesses, which broadly agree while showing normal textual variation.

The book opens with the theme that governs everything that follows: all wisdom comes from the Lord (1:1), and the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (1:14). Fear here is not terror of a tyrant. Ben Sira immediately pairs it with gladness, joy, and long life (1:11-13), having just said wisdom is poured out on those who love him (1:10). It is the reverence of a son who knows his father is God, the posture that makes a person teachable. This session plants the question the whole study will keep asking: where do I go to become wise, and what does it cost me?

Be ready for the canon question, because someone will ask why this book is not in their Protestant friend's Bible. Do not resolve it tonight. Acknowledge it warmly, note that the Church has read this book since the beginning (its old Latin name, *Ecclesiasticus*, means roughly the church book), and tell the group we will take that question head-on in our final session, with the strongest objections given a fair hearing. Planting the question now and paying it off in Session 12 is deliberate.

#### OT Roots and Fulfillment

Sirach 1 stands in the stream of Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 (the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and of knowledge) and Job 28:28. Ben Sira gathers Israel's whole wisdom tradition and hands it forward. Wisdom personified in 1:4 and 1:9 (created before all things, poured out upon all creation) picks up Proverbs 8:22-31, a thread Christian tradition reads as pointing to and fulfilled in Christ, the eternal and uncreated Wisdom of God (John 1:1-3; 1 Corinthians 1:24): the created poetic figure is not simply identical with the eternal Son, a distinction Session 8 teaches carefully. Do not reveal that fulfillment tonight: it is the payoff of Session 8 and of the sealed guess.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine of Hippo

Augustine opens his Confessions with the insight that frames this whole study: God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him. The search for wisdom is finally a search for God, and it begins when we stop pretending we are its source.

*Confessions, Book I, 1 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas distinguishes servile fear, which dreads punishment, from filial fear, which dreads being separated from the Father we love. Even imperfect fear, he teaches, can begin a soul's movement toward wisdom, and filial fear belongs to wisdom's flowering: fear matures alongside love rather than shrinking as love grows.

*Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 19 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Francis de Sales

Francis insisted that the pursuit of wisdom and devotion is not reserved for monks and priests. Every state of life, the soldier, the tradesman, the married person, can and must seek holiness where it stands. Ben Sira, teaching ordinary learners the way of wisdom in daily life, breathes the same conviction.

*Introduction to the Devout Life, Part I (paraphrased)*

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 105-108:** God is the author of Sacred Scripture; the inspired books teach the truth God wanted written for our salvation.
- **CCC 120:** The Church discerned and receives the complete canon of Scripture, including the 46 books of the Old Testament.
- **CCC 1831:** Fear of the Lord is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit that complete and perfect the virtues.

## Thread Watch

- **PLANT (Fear of the Lord):** 1:11-20 introduces fear of the Lord as wisdom's root, crown, and fullness. Let the group notice the surprising pairing of fear with joy. This matures across the study and resolves in Session 12.
- **PLANT (Who is Wisdom?):** 1:4 and 1:9-10 speak of Wisdom as created before all things and poured out on all creation. Someone may ask who or what this Wisdom is. Smile and say: hold that question, you will write down your guess tonight. Resolves in Session 8.
- **PLANT (Why is this book in my Bible?):** The Prologue raises the book's unusual history. Acknowledge, do not resolve. Resolves in Session 12.

## Session Goals

1. Meet Ben Sira and his grandson through the Prologue and establish when, where, and why the book was written.
2. Discover from chapter 1 that wisdom originates in God alone and is given, not achieved.
3. Define the fear of the Lord from the text itself, noticing its pairing with joy and love.
4. Plant the three long threads: fear of the Lord, the identity of Wisdom, and the book's place in the canon.
5. Have each participant seal a written guess: who or what is Wisdom in this book?

## Time Note

90 minutes. If running long, cut Build question 6 (the Prologue's three-part shape) and the second Dig Deeper box; do not cut the sealed guess, which the whole study depends on.

## SESSION 1: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 1: All Wisdom Comes from the Lord

#### Opening Prayer

*Father of all wisdom, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. As we open this book tonight, open our minds to understand it and our hearts to obey it. Give us the reverence that is the beginning of wisdom and the love that is its crown. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** If you could sit down for one hour with the wisest person you have ever known, living or dead, who would it be, and what would you ask?

**Win 2.** Where does our culture tell you to go when you need wisdom for a big decision? How well has that worked for you?

#### Build: Into the Text

##### LIVE DISCOVERY

**1.** Turn to the Prologue, the short preface before chapter 1 (in most RSV2CE Bibles it sits unnumbered before 1:1). Read it aloud together. Playing detective, what can we learn from this page alone about who wrote this book, who translated it, when, where, and why?

##### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The author is the translator's grandfather, Jesus (Yeshua) Ben Sira, a devoted student of the Law, the Prophets, and the other books of the fathers. The grandson came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of King Euergetes (132 BC) and translated the Hebrew into Greek there, apologizing that translations never fully capture the original. His stated purpose is that lovers of learning might make greater progress in living according to the Law.

Leader note: this is the only translator's preface in the Bible, and it gives us a rare window into how Scripture physically reached us: written by a human author under inspiration, copied, translated, carried between nations, and guarded by the believing community.

**2.** Read Sirach 1:1-10. According to Ben Sira, where does all wisdom come from, and where does it remain forever? What questions does he ask in verses 2-3 and 6, and what do they do to the reader?

##### ANSWER (share after the discussion)

All wisdom comes from the Lord and is with him for ever (1:1). The unanswerable questions (who can count the sand of the sea, who has searched out the height of heaven, to whom has wisdom's root been revealed?) humble the reader before we have even begun. Wisdom is not scaled by human effort; God alone possesses it and pours it out on those who love him (1:9-10).

3. Read Sirach 1:11-13. List every good thing these three verses attach to the fear of the Lord. Does the list surprise you? Why or why not?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Glory, exultation, gladness, and a crown of rejoicing (1:11); long life, a rejoicing heart, wellbeing at the end of life, blessing at death (1:12-13). The surprise is the register: we expect fear to produce anxiety, and instead it produces delight. This is our first clue that fear of the Lord means something richer than being scared of God.

4. Now read 1:14-20. Ben Sira builds a whole anatomy of wisdom around the fear of the Lord. What is fear of the Lord called in verse 14? In verse 16? In verse 18? In verse 20? Putting the images together, how would you define the fear of the Lord in your own words?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

It is the beginning of wisdom (1:14), the fullness of wisdom (1:16), the crown of wisdom (1:18), and the root of wisdom (1:20). Beginning, root, fullness, crown: it is not a stage you outgrow but the soil, trunk, and fruit all at once. A working definition: reverence that takes God seriously as God, real awe before his majesty, which grace matures into the loving reverence of a child before a good father whom it would be unthinkable to grieve.

Press gently: is this compatible with loving God? Verse 12 already answered: the fear of the Lord delights the heart.

## LIVE DISCOVERY

5. Ben Sira did not invent this idea. Split into pairs: one pair find Proverbs 9:10, another Proverbs 1:7, another Job 28:28, another Psalm 111:10. Read them aloud in turn. What is Ben Sira doing with Israel's older Scriptures?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Be precise with what each says: Proverbs 9:10 and Psalm 111:10 call the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom; Proverbs 1:7 calls it the beginning of knowledge; Job 28:28 says the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom. Ben Sira is deliberately gathering and handing on the received wisdom of Israel: he is a link in a living chain of teaching. This matters for later: it is exactly how the Church understands Tradition, the faithful handing on of what was received (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

6. Look back over the Prologue with fresh eyes. The grandson names the Law, the Prophets, and the other books of our fathers three separate times. What does that tell us about how Israel already thought about its Scriptures in 132 BC, and what question does it raise about this very book?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Israel already recognized a body of sacred writings in familiar groupings. And here is the wrinkle: the grandson translated an already-treasured Hebrew work so Greek-speaking Jews could live by it, and the Church would later discern its place among the sacred books. That raises the question someone has probably already asked: who decides which books are in the Bible? Name the question, promise it a full and fair hearing in our last session, and move on.



7. Read 1:26-27. What is the relationship between keeping the commandments and receiving wisdom? What does that suggest about someone who wants to become wise while keeping God at arm's length?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord will supply it (1:26). Wisdom is given to the obedient, not the merely curious. You cannot audit this course; wisdom is learned by apprenticeship to God. This is why the fear of the Lord comes first: without reverence there is no obedience, and without obedience there is no wisdom.

## THE SEALED GUESS

Before we close: in chapter 1 we met a mysterious figure, Wisdom, created before all things, poured out on all creation, given to those who love the Lord. This book will keep talking about her, and in Session 8 she will give a long speech in her own voice.

**On your Take-Home sheet tonight there is a box labeled My Guess. Before next week, write your answer to this question and do not show anyone: Who or what do you think Wisdom really is in this book? Fold the sheet or keep it hidden. We will open the guesses together in Session 8.**

## Dig Deeper

### **DIG DEEPER: The book with three names**

You will see this book called Sirach (from the author's name), Ecclesiasticus (the old Latin title, roughly the church book: traditionally explained by the Church's heavy use of it in instruction), and The Wisdom of Ben Sira. Same book. The abundance of names is itself evidence of how widely the Church has loved and used it.

### **DIG DEEPER: The Hebrew that came back from the dead**

For centuries the Hebrew original was thought lost, while Greek, Latin, Syriac, and other versions carried the book. Then in 1896 scholars identified medieval Hebrew copies of Sirach in the storeroom (genizah) of a Cairo synagogue, and in 1964 excavators at Masada found Hebrew Sirach scrolls from before AD 73. About two thirds of the Hebrew text has been recovered. God preserved his word along paths no one predicted.

## Send: Taking It Out

**Send 1.** Ben Sira says wisdom is given to those who fear the Lord, not to those who merely want to feel wise. What is one area of your life where you have been seeking answers without actually being willing to obey what you might hear?

**Send 2.** Who is one person God has placed in your life as a Ben Sira, a handed-on of wisdom? What would it look like to actually sit at their feet this month?

## Live It This Week

- Each day this week, before you open your phone in the morning, pray one sentence: Lord, give me the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom.
- Write your sealed My Guess answer on the Take-Home sheet and bring it back every week without showing anyone.
- Read the Prologue and Sirach 1 once more on your own, slowly, and underline every word connected to joy or gladness. Count them.

## Closing Prayer

*Lord God, source of all wisdom, thank you for the scribe who wrote and the grandson who translated, and for the Church that carried this book across twenty-two centuries into our hands. Teach us to fear you as sons and daughters, not as slaves, and let that reverence blossom into joy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## Scripture Memory Verse

"To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; she is created with the faithful in the womb." (**Sirach 1:14**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 2 (it is short, 18 verses). Read it twice.

## SESSION 1: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

### Session 1: All Wisdom Comes from the Lord

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. The Prologue to Sirach
7. Sirach 1:1-10
8. Sirach 1:11-13
9. Sirach 1:14-20
10. Proverbs 9:10
11. Proverbs 1:7
12. Job 28:28
13. Psalm 111:10
14. Sirach 1:26-27
15. 2 Thessalonians 2:15 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 1:14, "To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; she is created with the faithful in the womb."

# Take-Home for Session 1: All Wisdom Comes from the Lord

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- We met Jesus Ben Sira, a scribe teaching in Jerusalem around 200 to 175 BC, and his grandson, who translated the book into Greek in Egypt after 132 BC and left us the only translator's preface in the Bible.
- All wisdom comes from the Lord (1:1). It is a gift given to those who love and obey him, not a trophy for the clever.
- The fear of the Lord is wisdom's beginning, root, fullness, and crown, and Ben Sira pairs it with gladness, joy, and long life. It matures, by grace, into the loving reverence of a child for a good father: awe that draws near rather than terror that flees.
- The book left us with open questions we will carry forward, including one you have sealed in the box below.

## Voices of the Church

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine of Hippo**

Augustine opens his *Confessions* with the insight that frames this whole study: God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him. The search for wisdom is finally a search for God, and it begins when we stop pretending we are its source.

*Confessions, Book I, 1 (paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thomas Aquinas**

Aquinas distinguishes servile fear, which dreads punishment, from filial fear, which dreads being separated from the Father we love. Even imperfect fear, he teaches, can begin a soul's movement toward wisdom, and filial fear belongs to wisdom's flowering: fear matures alongside love rather than shrinking as love grows.

*Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 19 (paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Francis de Sales**

Francis insisted that the pursuit of wisdom and devotion is not reserved for monks and priests. Every state of life, the soldier, the tradesman, the married person, can and must seek holiness where it stands. Ben Sira, teaching ordinary learners the way of wisdom in daily life, breathes the same conviction.

*Introduction to the Devout Life, Part I (paraphrased)*

## Live It This Week

- Each day this week, before you open your phone in the morning, pray one sentence: Lord, give me the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom.

- Write your sealed My Guess answer on the Take-Home sheet and bring it back every week without showing anyone.
- Read the Prologue and Sirach 1 once more on your own, slowly, and underline every word connected to joy or gladness. Count them.

## Scripture Memory Verse

"To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; she is created with the faithful in the womb." (**Sirach 1:14**)

## Before Next Session

Read Sirach 2 (it is short, 18 verses). Read it twice.

## Catechism References

CCC 105-108; CCC 120; CCC 1831

### MY GUESS (sealed until Session 8)

Who or what do you think Wisdom really is in this book? Write your answer below, show no one, and bring this sheet back every week.

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## SESSION 2: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 2: Prepare Yourself for Temptation

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**Passage:** Sirach 2:1-18

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers that trial is not a sign that God has abandoned his servant but the normal furnace in which faith is proven, and that the pattern holds from Israel to Jesus himself.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Divine providence and the mystery of trial (CCC 2846-2849 on temptation; CCC 164 on faith tested).

#### What You Need to Know

Chapter 2 is the title chapter of our study and one of the most cherished chapters of Sirach in Catholic tradition: it is read at Mass, and its themes echo from the desert monks to The Imitation of Christ. Its opening line refuses to sugarcoat discipleship: if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation (2:1). The Greek word is *peirasmos*, which covers both testing and temptation, the same word family Jesus teaches us to pray about in the Our Father. Ben Sira is saying: the moment you volunteer for God's service, expect resistance.

The chapter's central image is metallurgy: gold is tested in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation (2:5). Fire does not destroy gold; it proves and purifies it. Ben Sira then gives the tested servant three anchors, each beginning you who fear the Lord: wait for mercy, trust him, hope for good things (2:7-9), and devastating rhetorical questions: who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame, or persevered in his fear and was forsaken? (2:10).

The session's live discovery is the payoff: the group will find that Jesus himself walks the Sirach 2:1 pattern. At his baptism he comes forward publicly to serve the Father, and the Spirit then leads him into the wilderness to be tempted (Matthew 3:16-4:1; Mark 1:12 says immediately). What Ben Sira taught as proverb, Christ lived as history. Keep this discovery for the group; do not preview it.

#### OT Roots and Fulfillment

The furnace of testing runs deep in Israel's memory: Abraham tested on Moriah (Genesis 22:1), Israel tested forty years in the wilderness to know what was in their heart (Deuteronomy 8:2), gold refined in Proverbs 17:3 and Wisdom 3:5-6. The New Testament receives the whole stream: count it all joy when you meet various trials (James 1:2-4), and the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold tested by fire (1 Peter 1:6-7). Peter and James write in imagery that strongly resonates with Sirach 2.

#### Voices of the Church

##### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Anthony of the Desert**

The father of monks, according to the sayings handed down from the Egyptian desert, taught that no one can enter the kingdom of heaven untested, and that we should expect temptation to our last breath. His sayings echo the realism of Sirach 2:1: temptation is the job description of anyone serious about God.

*Traditional sayings of the Desert Fathers associated with St. Anthony (Apophthegmata Patrum tradition, paraphrased)*

#### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Teresa of Ávila**

Teresa, who endured decades of dryness and opposition, counseled her sisters that patience obtains everything, that God does not change, and that whoever has God lacks nothing. Her famous bookmark prayer is Sirach 2:6 (trust in him, and he will help you) lived out over a lifetime.

*The bookmark prayer found in her breviary, traditionally attributed to St. Teresa (paraphrased)*

#### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: Thomas à Kempis**

The Imitation of Christ teaches that no one is so perfect as to be beyond temptation, and that trials are useful because they humble, purify, and instruct us. Fire tests iron, he writes, and temptation tests the just man. The thought is Sirach 2:5 handed on across some sixteen centuries.

*The Imitation of Christ, Book I, ch. 13 (traditionally attributed to Thomas à Kempis, paraphrased)*

### **Catechism Connection**

- **CCC 2846-2849:** On the petition lead us not into temptation: God does not tempt anyone to evil; the Spirit helps us discern between trial, which is necessary for growth, and temptation, which leads to sin.
- **CCC 164-165:** Faith is often lived in darkness and can be put to the test; we turn to the witnesses of faith who endured.

### **Thread Watch**

- **DEVELOP (Fear of the Lord):** 2:7-9 and 2:15-17 address you who fear the Lord three times each. Notice with the group that the fearers of the Lord are precisely the trusters and hoppers: fear and trust are friends, not rivals.
- **TEND (Who is Wisdom?):** No new data tonight, but if anyone tries to discuss their sealed guess, cheerfully shut it down. Guesses stay sealed until Session 8.

### **Session Goals**

1. Establish from 2:1 that trial is the expected companion of anyone who steps forward to serve God.
2. Unpack the gold-in-the-furnace image of 2:5 and what it implies about what trials are for.
3. Find the three anchors given to the tested servant in 2:7-9 and the argument of 2:10-11.
4. Discover, live, that Jesus himself walks the Sirach 2:1 pattern at his baptism and temptation.
5. Send each person into the week with a concrete way to reframe one current trial.

### **Time Note**

90 minutes. If running long, cut Build question 3 (the double woe of 2:12-14) and compress the second Win question; keep the Matthew 3-4 live discovery at full length.

## SESSION 2: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 2: Prepare Yourself for Temptation

#### Opening Prayer

*Lord Jesus, you came forward to serve the Father and were led into the wilderness to be tempted. Walk with us tonight as we study the furnace of testing. Give us gold-making faith: the trust that waits, hopes, and does not depart from you. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** Think of a skill you are genuinely good at. What did it cost you to get good, and was there a moment you almost quit?

**Win 2.** When something painful happens to a believer, our first instinct is often what did I do wrong? Where do you think we learned that reflex?

#### Build: Into the Text

**1.** Read Sirach 2:1-2 aloud. What is the very first thing Ben Sira tells the person who comes forward to serve the Lord? Is this the recruiting pitch you would expect? Why would a teacher open this way?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Prepare yourself for temptation. Set your heart right, be steadfast, do not be hasty in time of calamity. It is shockingly honest recruiting: no prosperity promises, just a soldier's briefing. A teacher opens this way because disciples who expect ease will desert at the first ambush; disciples who expect the furnace will stand. Jesus recruits the same way: take up your cross (Matthew 16:24).

**2.** Read 2:4-5. What is the image in verse 5, and how does it answer the question what are trials for? What is the difference between fire that destroys and fire that refines?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Gold is tested in fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation. Fire applied to wood destroys; fire applied to gold reveals and purifies, burning off dross while the gold itself survives brighter. The image claims that trials, received in faith, do not destroy the servant but prove and purify him. Note what the furnace is called: humiliation. The dross the furnace most often exposes is pride.

**3.** Read 2:12-14. Between the comfort passages, Ben Sira pronounces three woes. On whom, and why is losing endurance (2:14) treated so seriously?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Woe to timid hearts and slack hands, to the sinner who walks a double path, to the timid heart that does not trust, and to you who have lost your endurance. The double path is divided allegiance: serving God while keeping an escape route. Endurance is treated as life-or-death because in this book faith is not a



feeling but a hold; to release the grip mid-furnace is to lose everything the fire was producing.

4. Read 2:7-9 aloud slowly. Three sentences begin with the same address. Who is addressed, and what three commands are given? Then read 2:10-11: what evidence does Ben Sira offer that the commands are reasonable?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

You who fear the Lord: wait for his mercy, trust in him, hope for good things. The evidence is an appeal to the entire track record of God: consider the ancient generations and see, who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame? None. The Lord is compassionate and merciful, forgives sins and saves in affliction. Ben Sira invites us to cross-examine history itself.

Connect the thread: the people commanded to trust are the fearers of the Lord. Fear of the Lord and radical trust turn out to be the same posture seen from two sides.

### LIVE DISCOVERY

5. Now the discovery. Someone turn to Matthew 3:16-17 and read it; someone else immediately continue with Matthew 4:1-4. Watch the sequence closely. What happens to Jesus, in what order, and where have we seen this pattern tonight?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

At his baptism Jesus publicly comes forward for his mission, and the Father declares him beloved Son. Then the Spirit leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1; Mark adds immediately, 1:12). Come forward to serve, then prepare yourself for temptation: Jesus walks the very pattern Sirach 2:1 describes. The pattern is not a malfunction of discipleship; it is the path the Master himself walked.

Push one step: Israel was tested forty years in the wilderness and grumbled; Jesus is tested forty days and stands, answering every temptation from Scripture. He is the faithful Israelite, the acceptable man proven in the furnace.

6. Notice how Jesus fights in Matthew 4: three temptations, three quotations of Scripture. Now look back at Sirach 2:15-16. What do those who fear the Lord do with God's words, and what does that suggest about how we prepare for temptation before it arrives?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Those who fear the Lord do not disobey his words; they seek his approval and are filled with his law. Jesus answers each temptation from a heart already full of Scripture. Preparation for the furnace happens in peacetime: Scripture memorized, sacraments frequented, prayer habitual. You cannot forge armor during the battle.

7. Read 2:18 to close the chapter. Given a choice of judges, whose hands does Ben Sira choose to fall into, and why? Where does a Christian hear this sentence echoed?

### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, but not into the hands of men, for as his majesty is, so also is his mercy. His mercy is proportioned to his greatness: infinite majesty, infinite mercy. King David makes the same choice in 2 Samuel 24:14, in closely related terms, and the penitent in the confessional makes it again: it is safer to entrust oneself to God, whose judgment is perfectly just and merciful, than to merely human judgment.

## **Dig Deeper**

### **DIG DEEPER: Peirasmos and the Our Father**

The Greek word in 2:1 (peirasmos) is the same word family as lead us not into temptation (Matthew 6:13). The Catechism explains the petition: we ask God not to let us take the path that leads to sin, and to distinguish between trial, which strengthens, and temptation, which entices to evil. God never tempts anyone to evil (James 1:13), and trials met in faith work steadfastness (James 1:2-4). See CCC 2846-2847.

### **DIG DEEPER: Sirach in the Mass**

Sirach 2 appears in the Lectionary for weekday Mass. Watch for the Church reading you this book: Sirach turns up at Sunday Mass in Ordinary Time, on feasts, and in the Liturgy of the Hours. The Church never stopped teaching from Ben Sira's classroom.

## **Send: Taking It Out**

**Send 1.** Name one furnace you are in right now, big or small. Bringing 2:5 into it, what would change this week if you asked God to make this fire refining rather than destroying?

**Send 2.** Ben Sira says woe to the one who walks a double path. Is there an escape route you are keeping open, a corner of life fenced off from God, just in case? What would closing it cost?

## **Live It This Week**

- Memorize the memory verse cold. It is the title of our whole study; you will use it for the rest of your life.
- Take the trial you named in the Send question and write one prayer at the top of a journal page: Lord, use this furnace to refine me. Under it, each day this week, write one line about what God might be burning off.
- Pray the last petitions of the Our Father slowly each night (lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil), remembering that the Greek of Sirach 2:1 uses peirasmos, the same word family as this petition.

## **Closing Prayer**

*Father, as your majesty is, so also is your mercy. We choose to fall into your hands. Steady the timid heart, strengthen the slack hands, and keep us off the double path. Refine us in the furnace and do not let the fire go to waste. Through Christ our Lord, who was tempted in every way yet without sin. Amen.*

## Scripture Memory Verse

"My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation." (**Sirach 2:1**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 3:1-16 and 3:17-31, and notice which two very different topics the chapter joins.

## SESSION 2: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

### Session 2: Prepare Yourself for Temptation

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 2:1-2
7. Sirach 2:4-5
8. Sirach 2:12-14
9. Sirach 2:7-9
10. Sirach 2:10-11
11. Matthew 3:16-17
12. Matthew 4:1-4
13. Sirach 2:15-16
14. Sirach 2:18
15. 2 Samuel 24:14 (leader reference)
16. James 1:2-4 and 1 Peter 1:6-7 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 2:1, "My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation."

# Take-Home for Session 2: Prepare Yourself for Temptation

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- Ben Sira's honest recruiting pitch: if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation (2:1). Trial is the normal companion of discipleship, not a sign of God's absence.
- Gold is tested in fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation (2:5). Fire refines gold; trials received in faith purify rather than destroy.
- Three anchors for the tested: wait for his mercy, trust in him, hope for good things (2:7-9), backed by history's cross-examination: who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame? (2:10).
- We discovered Jesus living the pattern: baptized and declared beloved Son, then led straight into the wilderness to be tempted (Matthew 3:16-4:1). The Master walked the road first.

## Voices of the Church

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Anthony of the Desert**

The father of monks, according to the sayings handed down from the Egyptian desert, taught that no one can enter the kingdom of heaven untested, and that we should expect temptation to our last breath. His sayings echo the realism of Sirach 2:1: temptation is the job description of anyone serious about God.

*Traditional sayings of the Desert Fathers associated with St. Anthony (Apophthegmata Patrum tradition, paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Teresa of Ávila**

Teresa, who endured decades of dryness and opposition, counseled her sisters that patience obtains everything, that God does not change, and that whoever has God lacks nothing. Her famous bookmark prayer is Sirach 2:6 (trust in him, and he will help you) lived out over a lifetime.

*The bookmark prayer found in her breviary, traditionally attributed to St. Teresa (paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: Thomas à Kempis**

The Imitation of Christ teaches that no one is so perfect as to be beyond temptation, and that trials are useful because they humble, purify, and instruct us. Fire tests iron, he writes, and temptation tests the just man. The thought is Sirach 2:5 handed on across some sixteen centuries.

*The Imitation of Christ, Book I, ch. 13 (traditionally attributed to Thomas à Kempis, paraphrased)*

## Live It This Week

- Memorize the memory verse cold. It is the title of our whole study; you will use it for the rest of your life.
- Take the trial you named in the Send question and write one prayer at the top of a journal page: Lord, use this furnace to refine me. Under it, each day this week, write one line about what God might be burning off.

- Pray the last petitions of the Our Father slowly each night (lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil), remembering that the Greek of Sirach 2:1 uses peirasmós, the same word family as this petition.

### **Scripture Memory Verse**

"My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation." (**Sirach 2:1**)

### **Before Next Session**

Read Sirach 3:1-16 and 3:17-31, and notice which two very different topics the chapter joins.

### **Catechism References**

CCC 2846-2849; CCC 164-165

## SESSION 3: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 3: Honor, Humility, and the Fire That Water Quenches

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**Passage:** Sirach 3:1-31

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers that honoring father and mother, walking in humility, and giving alms are not merely nice behaviors but are woven by God into the economy of atonement, and wrestles honestly with what almsgiving atones for sin can and cannot mean.

**Catholic Touchstone:** The fourth commandment (CCC 2214-2220) and almsgiving as a form of penance (CCC 1434) and a chief work of mercy (CCC 2447).

#### What You Need to Know

Sirach 3 joins three topics modern readers keep apart: honoring parents (3:1-16), humility (3:17-24), and almsgiving (3:26-31). Ben Sira sees one fabric. The person rightly ordered toward the father and mother God gave them, and rightly sized before God, will be openhanded toward the poor. The chapter twice makes claims that startle Christians raised on certain slogans: kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and against your sins it will be credited to you (3:14), and the summit, water extinguishes a blazing fire: so almsgiving atones for sin (3:30).

Tonight includes the study's first full steelman chain. You will present the Protestant objection at genuine full strength before answering it: do not weaken it, because our young adults will meet it at full strength from roommates and podcasts. The objection: Scripture says Christ's one sacrifice atones (Hebrews 10:12-14) and salvation is by grace through faith, not works (Ephesians 2:8-9), so Sirach 3:30 teaches works-righteousness, and this is exactly why the book is not in our Bible. Let it land. Then build the Catholic answer from Scripture itself, including books every Protestant accepts.

The Catholic answer in brief, for your preparation: Christ alone objectively expiates sin and reconciles humanity to the Father; almsgiving adds nothing to his sacrifice, and mortal sin after baptism requires repentance and sacramental confession, with perfect contrition availing only alongside the firm resolve to confess (CCC 1452). What almsgiving in grace does is apply the fruits of the Cross to us as charity, conversion, satisfaction, and penance, able to remit venial sin and temporal punishment insofar as it proceeds from charity. State that order first, then let Scripture speak in its own strong voice: love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8, Peter deliberately echoing Proverbs 10:12), break off your sins by practicing righteousness and showing mercy to the oppressed (Daniel 4:27), give for alms those things which are within, and behold, everything is clean for you (Luke 11:41, Jesus speaking), and the sheep and goats are judged precisely on mercy shown (Matthew 25:31-46). Almsgiving atones not as a rival payment to the Cross but as love, poured into us by grace, making the Cross's medicine our own. The Catechism lists almsgiving with prayer and fasting as a classic form of penance (CCC 1434) that expresses conversion.

#### OT Roots and Fulfillment

Honor your father and your mother is the fourth commandment, the first with a promise (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16; Ephesians 6:2-3). Ben Sira's almsgiving teaching stands on Proverbs 16:6 (by loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for), Proverbs 19:17 (he who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord), and Daniel

4:27, and it flows forward into Tobit 12:9 (almsgiving delivers from death and purges away every sin) and straight into the teaching of Jesus (Luke 11:41; Matthew 6:2-4; Matthew 25) and the early Church.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Cyprian of Carthage

Writing around AD 253, Cyprian composed an entire treatise on works and almsgiving in which he directly quotes Sirach 3:30, teaching that as water extinguishes fire, so almsgiving extinguishes sin. For Cyprian, baptism washes away past sins once, and Spirit-prompted mercy keeps the baptized clean thereafter, all of it Christ's gift.

*On Works and Almsgiving, 2 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Chrysostom

Chrysostom told his people they could see an altar lying in the streets: the poor man himself, an altar built of the very members of Christ, on which sacrifice may be offered at every hour. He treated generosity to the poor as inseparable from worthy worship at the Church's altar.

*Homily 20 on Second Corinthians (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Peter Chrysologus

Chrysologus preached that faith stands on three companions that give life to one another: prayer, fasting, and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains what it asks, and mercy receives it; whoever prays, he taught, should fast, and whoever fasts should show mercy, so that our own petitions are heard as we hear the petitions of the poor.

*Sermon 43 (paraphrased)*

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 2214-2220:** The duties of children: respect, gratitude, obedience while at home, and lifelong honor and support of parents.
- **CCC 1434:** The interior penance of the Christian is expressed above all in fasting, prayer, and almsgiving.
- **CCC 2447:** Among the works of mercy, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity and a work of justice pleasing to God.

## Thread Watch

- **PLANT** (Almsgiving and atonement): 3:14-15 and 3:30 plant the claim that mercy shown is credited against sin. Tonight's steelman opens the question; Session 6 develops it with Sirach 29 and 31 and the teaching of Jesus; Session 9 echoes it in worship.
- **DEVELOP** (Fear of the Lord): 3:17-20 ties humility to finding favor with God: the greater you are, the more you must humble yourself. Humility and filial fear exercise the same posture of soul: a thematic bridge worth naming aloud.



## Session Goals

1. Draw out of 3:1-16 the startling weight Scripture puts on honoring parents, including for adults with aging parents.
2. Understand humility (3:17-24) as accurate self-knowledge before God rather than self-hatred.
3. Run the study's first full steelman: present the sola fide objection to 3:30 at full strength.
4. Answer it from Scripture and the Catechism: charity, born of grace, really participates in Christ's one atonement.
5. Commit to one concrete act each of honor (toward a parent) and almsgiving this week.

## Time Note

90 minutes and full. Pre-chosen cuts: Build question 2 (3:12-13 on a father's old age) can merge into question 1, and the second Dig Deeper can go home unread. Protect the steelman chain: it needs its full 25 minutes.

## SESSION 3: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 3: Honor, Humility, and the Fire That Water Quenches

#### Opening Prayer

*Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, teach us tonight the honor we owe our parents, the humility we owe you, and the mercy we owe the poor. Let us not flinch from hard questions, and let your word, not our comfort, have the last say. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** What is one thing, funny or serious, that your parents did for you that you only appreciated years later?

**Win 2.** When you hear the word humility, what image comes to mind? Is it attractive to you or slightly repellent? Be honest.

#### Build: Into the Text

**1.** Read Sirach 3:1-6. List the concrete benefits Ben Sira attaches to honoring father and mother. Which one surprises you most, and why might God attach such weight to this commandment in particular?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Atonement for sins (3:3), laying up treasure (3:4), gladness from one's own children, answered prayer, long life (3:5-6). The atonement language surprises most. The fourth commandment is the hinge of the Decalogue: the first three order us to God, the last six to neighbor, and parents stand at the joint, God's first representatives to us. To honor them is to honor the order God built into the world.

**2.** Read 3:12-16, which speaks directly to adult children of aging parents. What does Ben Sira command when a father's mind fails (3:13), and what verdict does he pronounce on the one who angers or forsakes a parent? How does this land in a culture that outsources its elderly?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Help your father in his old age, do not grieve him; even if his understanding fails, be patient and do not despise him. Kindness to a father will not be forgotten but credited against your sins (3:14), while whoever forsakes his father is like a blasphemer (3:16): the shocking word choice equates abandoning a parent with insulting God. This is a live moral summons for our generation, not a museum piece; caring presence to declining parents is treated by Scripture as worship.

**3.** Read 3:17-20. What does Ben Sira say the great man must do, and what reason does verse 20 give? Using verse 17's promise (you will be loved more than a giver of gifts), build a definition of humility that is not self-hatred.

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself, for great is the might of the Lord, and by the

humble he is glorified. Humility is accurate sizing: seeing yourself truly next to God's greatness, which makes gentleness possible. It is not thinking poorly of yourself; it is thinking of yourself rarely and of God rightly. Ben Sira promises the humble are loved: pride repels, humility attracts, because it makes room for others.

Forward echo the leader may name: God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6, quoting Proverbs 3:34): James, the most Sirach-flavored book in the New Testament, will keep showing up in this study.

4. Read 3:21-24. Ben Sira warns against prying into matters too great and too marvelous. Is he anti-intellectual? Read it next to verse 22 (reflect upon what has been assigned to you). What is he actually forbidding, and what is he protecting?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Not anti-intellectual: this is the man who ran a school and praised the scribe's lifelong study. He forbids the pride that demands God explain himself before we will obey, speculation as a substitute for obedience. What has been revealed belongs to us (Deuteronomy 29:29); the hidden things belong to God. He protects wonder and the teachability that pride kills. The humble scholar goes further than the arrogant one because he lets truth be bigger than his head.

## STEELMAN

5. Now read Sirach 3:30 aloud: Water extinguishes a blazing fire: so almsgiving atones for sin. Before we respond as Catholics, we are going to make the strongest possible Protestant case against this verse. Someone read Hebrews 10:12-14 and someone read Ephesians 2:8-9. Now, arguing as honestly as you can, state the objection: why would a thoughtful Protestant say Sirach 3:30 is unbiblical, and even evidence against the book itself?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

The objection at full strength: Hebrews says Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins and by it has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. Atonement is finished, complete, and his alone. Ephesians says salvation is by grace through faith, not because of works, lest any man should boast. If my almsgiving atones for my sin, then either Christ's sacrifice was insufficient or I am boasting in my checkbook. Sirach 3:30 therefore teaches works-righteousness, and its presence in the Catholic Bible shows why the Reformers were right to set these books aside.

Let the group feel the force. Do not rush past it. Then move to the next question, where Scripture itself answers.

## STEELMAN, PART TWO: THE ANSWER

6. Now let Scripture cross-examine the objection, using only books Protestants accept. Assign four readers: 1 Peter 4:8, Daniel 4:27, Luke 11:41, and Matthew 25:34-40. After each is read aloud, ask: who is speaking, and what is claimed about mercy and sin? Then, together: how do we hold these verses and Hebrews 10 at the same time?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Peter: hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Daniel to the pagan king: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed. Jesus himself: give for alms those things which are within; and behold, everything is clean for you. And Jesus again at the judgment: the blessed inherit the kingdom on the evidence of feeding, clothing, welcoming, and visiting him in the least of these. Notice the registers: 1 Peter 4:8 and Luke 11:41 speak directly of sins covered and everything made clean; Daniel counsels breaking off sins by mercy; Matthew 25 makes mercy the evidence at judgment. Together they talk the way Sirach 3:30 talks.

The resolution is not either-or but source-and-stream, and the order of the sentences matters, so give them in this order. First: Christ alone objectively expiates sin and reconciles humanity to the Father, once for all; the Church has no second fountain, and almsgiving adds nothing to his sacrifice. Second: the forgiveness of guilt comes through grace and repentance in the sacraments: baptism first, and for mortal sin after baptism, sacramental confession; perfect contrition reconciles a person with God before confession only when it includes the firm resolution to confess as soon as possible (CCC 1452, 1457). No quantity of alms substitutes for this. Third, and only now: almsgiving performed in grace applies the fruits of the Cross to us: it is charity, conversion, satisfaction, and penance (CCC 1434; and CCC 1473 on taking up works of mercy and penance in the face of sin's temporal consequences), able to remit venial sin and temporal punishment precisely insofar as it proceeds from the charity God pours into us (Romans 5:5) and turns the heart back to him. In that carefully ordered sense, and no other, Scripture says what it says: love covers a multitude of sins. Almsgiving atones the way a branch bears fruit: nothing apart from the vine, everything through it (John 15:5). The objection was right that Christ alone atones; it was wrong to assume grace leaves us spectators.

Sirach is not selling indulgence-vending; he is describing how mercy given participates in mercy received: blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy (Matthew 5:7). If the group remembers one sentence, make it the ordered one: Christ atones; grace forgives through repentance and the sacraments; charity, born of grace, makes the medicine ours.

7. Read 3:26-29 on the stubborn heart. Ben Sira places these verses right before the almsgiving line. Why might a hard heart and a closed hand belong to the same person, and what does that suggest about the real target of tonight's chapter?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

A stubborn heart, loaded with its own pains and sins, has no room for anyone else's. The closed hand is the symptom; the hard heart is the disease. The chapter's real target is the whole inward-curved self: pride toward God, coldness toward parents, tightness toward the poor are one posture. Honor, humility, and almsgiving are one cure: the self uncured, turned outward, made merciful because it has received mercy.

## Dig Deeper

**DIG DEEPER: Tobit says it too**

Tobit 12:9, in the mouth of the angel Raphael: almsgiving delivers from death, and it will purge away every sin. Sirach and Tobit, both deuterocanonical, teach it together, and Jesus in Luke 11:41 and 12:33 (sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old) talks the same way. We return to this in Session 6.

### **DIG DEEPER: What almsgiving is not**

Almsgiving is not a payment that obligates God, not a substitute for repentance, and not a way around confession for grave sin. The Council of Trent teaches that we can do nothing meritorious before grace; everything begins with God's free initiative. Grace first, then grace-filled works that God crowns: when God crowns our merits, St. Augustine says, he crowns his own gifts (Letter 194).

### **Send: Taking It Out**

**Send 1.** Be concrete: what is one act of honor your father or mother (or a grandparent, or the person who raised you) will actually receive from you this week: a call, a visit, a debt of gratitude finally spoken?

**Send 2.** Where is your heart currently stubborn, loaded with its own concerns, and closed-handed? What would water on that fire look like?

### **Live It This Week**

- Do the act of honor you named in the Send question. Do not let the week end without it.
- Give one real act of almsgiving this week, quietly (Matthew 6:3), scaled to actually cost you something.
- Pray the memory verse before bed each night, and each time ask: whose fire did my water touch today?

### **Closing Prayer**

*Lord Jesus Christ, our only atonement, pour your charity into our hearts so that honor flows to our parents, humility before our God, and mercy to your poor. Let nothing we give be our boast, and let nothing you give lie idle in our hands. Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.*

### **Scripture Memory Verse**

"Water extinguishes a blazing fire: so almsgiving atones for sin." (**Sirach 3:30**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 5:9-6:1 and all of Sirach 28.

## SESSION 3: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

### Session 3: Honor, Humility, and the Fire That Water Quenches

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 3:1-6
7. Sirach 3:12-16
8. Sirach 3:17-20
9. Sirach 3:21-24
10. Sirach 3:30
11. Hebrews 10:12-14
12. Ephesians 2:8-9
13. 1 Peter 4:8
14. Daniel 4:27
15. Luke 11:41
16. Matthew 25:34-40
17. Sirach 3:26-29
18. Tobit 12:9 (leader reference)
19. John 15:5 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 3:30, "Water extinguishes a blazing fire: so almsgiving atones for sin."

# Take-Home for Session 3: Honor, Humility, and the Fire That Water Quenches

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- Honoring father and mother sits at the hinge of the Ten Commandments, and Scripture attaches astonishing weight to it: atonement, treasure, answered prayer, long life (3:3-6), and a special summons to patience with a parent whose mind fails in old age (3:12-16).
- Humility is accurate self-knowledge before God, not self-hatred: the greater you are, the more you must humble yourself, and the humble are loved (3:17-18).
- We searched Scripture's whole witness on almsgiving atones for sin (3:30), with 1 Peter 4:8, Daniel 4:27, Luke 11:41, and Matthew 25, and found the Catholic order: Christ alone objectively atones; grace forgives through repentance and the sacraments; and almsgiving born of grace applies the fruits of the Cross as charity, satisfaction, and penance, like a branch bearing the vine's fruit (John 15:5).
- The closed hand and the hard heart are one disease; honor, humility, and mercy are one cure.

## Voices of the Church

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Cyprian of Carthage**

Writing around AD 253, Cyprian composed an entire treatise on works and almsgiving in which he directly quotes Sirach 3:30, teaching that as water extinguishes fire, so almsgiving extinguishes sin. For Cyprian, baptism washes away past sins once, and Spirit-prompted mercy keeps the baptized clean thereafter, all of it Christ's gift.

*On Works and Almsgiving, 2 (paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Chrysostom**

Chrysostom told his people they could see an altar lying in the streets: the poor man himself, an altar built of the very members of Christ, on which sacrifice may be offered at every hour. He treated generosity to the poor as inseparable from worthy worship at the Church's altar.

*Homily 20 on Second Corinthians (paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Peter Chrysologus**

Chrysologus preached that faith stands on three companions that give life to one another: prayer, fasting, and mercy. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting obtains what it asks, and mercy receives it; whoever prays, he taught, should fast, and whoever fasts should show mercy, so that our own petitions are heard as we hear the petitions of the poor.

*Sermon 43 (paraphrased)*

## **Live It This Week**

- Do the act of honor you named in the Send question. Do not let the week end without it.
- Give one real act of almsgiving this week, quietly (Matthew 6:3), scaled to actually cost you something.
- Pray the memory verse before bed each night, and each time ask: whose fire did my water touch today?

## **Scripture Memory Verse**

"Water extinguishes a blazing fire: so almsgiving atones for sin." (**Sirach 3:30**)

## **Before Next Session**

Read Sirach 5:9-6:1 and all of Sirach 28.

## **Catechism References**

CCC 2214-2220; CCC 1434; CCC 2447



## SESSION 4: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 4: The Tongue, the Spark, and the Sins We Hold

**Passage:** Sirach 5:9-6:1; 19:6-17; 28:1-7, 12-26

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers Ben Sira's searching theology of speech, and finds that Sirach 28:2 (forgive your neighbor, then your sins will be pardoned when you pray) is taught, almost word for word, by Jesus in the Our Father.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Offenses against truth: rash judgment, detraction, calumny (CCC 2477-2479); the forgiveness petition of the Our Father (CCC 2838-2845).

#### What You Need to Know

Ben Sira returns to the tongue more than almost any other topic, and tonight we gather his scattered teaching into three movements. First, the double-tongued person (5:9-6:1): saying different things to different audiences, winnowing with every wind. Second, the ethics of hearing and repeating (19:6-17): what to do when a report about someone reaches you, including his startlingly fair rule, question a friend, for often it is slander, and do not believe everything you hear. Third, the great chapter 28: the unforgiving man who cherishes wrath while asking God for healing (28:3), and the tongue as a spark that sets forests ablaze (28:12-26).

The session's live discovery is one of the cleanest in the whole study. Sirach 28:2 reads: Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. The group will place it beside Matthew 6:12 and 6:14-15 and the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35) and see that Jesus teaches Ben Sira's principle as the one petition of the Our Father he stops to underline. Ben Sira wrote about two centuries before the Sermon on the Mount; let the group feel the continuity of God's pedagogy.

Pastoral care: someone in your group is carrying a wound where forgiveness feels impossible, possibly involving real abuse. Be ready to say clearly that forgiving is not pretending it did not happen, not excusing, not necessarily reconciling or re-trusting, and not a feeling: it is the will's decision, with God's grace, to release the debt to God and desire the person's good. It can take years and often needs help. Sirach 28:3 is a mirror, not a club.

#### OT Roots and Fulfillment

Israel's wisdom tradition is dense with tongue teaching: death and life are in the power of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21), a soft answer turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1), keep your tongue from evil (Psalm 34:13). The New Testament heir is the Letter of James, whose chapter 3 (the tongue is a fire, a small member boasting great things, set among our members staining the whole body) reads like a homily on Sirach 28:12-26. James also inherits the hearing ethic: be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger (James 1:19).

#### Voices of the Church

##### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine of Hippo**

Augustine had a warning carved into his dining table: whoever loves to gnaw at the life of the absent

should know this table is closed to him. His biographer St. Possidius records that he enforced the rule even on visiting bishops. For the Doctor of Grace, the reputation of the absent was sacred ground, guarded at the very place where talk flows easiest.

*St. Possidius, Life of St. Augustine, 22 (paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Philip Neri**

A story handed down about the Apostle of Rome tells of a penitent given an unusual penance for gossip: pluck a chicken while walking through town, then go back and collect every feather. The scattered feathers, impossible to regather, were the point. Whether or not every detail is historical, the Church has retold it for centuries because it is exactly true to life.

*Traditional story of St. Philip Neri (as handed down)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Francis de Sales**

The gentle Doctor devotes chapters of the Introduction to the Devout Life to speech: never speak evil of another without true charitable necessity, he counsels, for detraction is a kind of murder committed against a neighbor's honor, and the tongue that slanders kills three souls with one blow. His remedy is deliberate, habitual kindness of speech.

*Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III, ch. 29 (paraphrased)*

## **Catechism Connection**

- **CCC 2477-2479:** Respect for reputation forbids rash judgment, detraction (disclosing another's faults without valid reason), and calumny (lying about another).
- **CCC 2838-2845:** Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive: the outpouring of God's mercy cannot penetrate a heart that refuses to forgive; in forgiving, the disciple resembles the Father.

## **Thread Watch**

- **DEVELOP** (Fear of the Lord): 28:1-7 grounds forgiveness in remembering the end of your life and the commandments: the fearer of the Lord forgives because he remembers who is watching and where he is going.
- **TEND** (Almsgiving and atonement): 28:2 extends the Session 3 pattern: mercy given opens the channel of mercy received. Name the rhyme when the group finds it.

## **Session Goals**

1. Diagnose double-tongued speech (5:9-6:1) and its modern habitats, including the group chat and the anonymous account.
2. Learn Ben Sira's ethic of hearing (19:6-17): the presumption of innocence and the duty to go to the person.
3. Discover live that Jesus teaches Sirach 28:2 in the Our Father and underlines it in Matthew 18.
4. Trace the spark-to-forest anatomy of the destroying tongue in 28:12-26.
5. Send each person to release one held debt and to fast from one habit of harmful speech.

## **Time Note**

90 minutes. Pre-chosen cuts: Build question 2 (5:1-8 presumption, an optional on-ramp) is already omitted from the main flow; if still long, compress question 6 (28:12-26) to a single read-and-name exercise. Protect the Matthew discovery and the pastoral note on what forgiveness is not.

## SESSION 4: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 4: The Tongue, the Spark, and the Sins We Hold

#### Opening Prayer

*Lord, set a guard over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips. Tonight, teach us the weight of words: the ones we speak, the ones we repeat, and the ones we refuse to say in forgiveness. Make our speech like your Son's, full of grace and truth. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** What is a sentence someone said to you, encouraging or cutting, that you can still quote word for word years later? (Share only what you are comfortable sharing.)

**Win 2.** Why do you think gossip feels good in the moment? What is it giving us?

#### Build: Into the Text

**1.** Read Sirach 5:9-6:1. What is the double-tongued person, and what images does Ben Sira use (winnowing with every wind, following every path)? Where does double-tonguedness live today, and why does 6:1 say it earns shame and disgrace?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

The double-tongued person adjusts the message to the audience: one version of events for this friend, another for that one, agreeing with whoever is present. Winnowing with every wind means having no fixed weight of your own. Today it lives in group chats about absent friends, curated online personas, and the gap between what we say to a person and about them. It earns disgrace because it is eventually discovered, and because a person with two tongues turns out to have no self anyone can trust.

Note the positive command hidden in 5:11: be quick to hear, and answer with deliberation, which James 1:19 will repeat almost verbatim.

**2.** Read Sirach 19:6-12. What does Ben Sira tell you to do with a report you hear about someone else? What does the vivid image in 19:12 (like an arrow stuck in the flesh of the thigh is a word inside a fool) say about the discipline of not repeating things?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Never repeat a conversation, and you will lose nothing at all (19:7): the default is burial, not broadcast. With friend or enemy, do not tell it unless silence would make you guilty of sin: an important exception, because protecting the innocent can require speech. The arrow image is honest comedy: an undelivered piece of gossip physically pains the fool; he must groan it out. The discipline of the wise is to let information die inside them.

**3.** Read Sirach 19:13-17. Here is Ben Sira's most surprising rule: question a friend, perhaps he did not do it; question a neighbor, perhaps he did not say it; question a friend again, for often it is slander (19:13-15). What

procedure is he prescribing when you hear something bad about someone, and where does Jesus command the same direct, private instinct?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Go directly to the person. Ask them. Presume the report may be false or incomplete (often it is), and give them the chance to explain or to stop. This is the presumption of innocence practiced as a personal virtue, centuries before it was a legal one. Jesus commands the same instinct for the brother who sins against you: go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone (Matthew 18:15). The Christian's default is the person, not the audience. And name the exceptions plainly: crimes, abuse, and safety concerns are not gossip to be managed privately; they belong promptly with the appropriate civil and Church authorities, and protecting the innocent can require speech (19:8).

Connect to CCC 2478: interpret your neighbor's words and deeds in the most favorable way possible, a rule the Catechism borrows from St. Ignatius of Loyola.

**LIVE DISCOVERY**

4. Now read Sirach 28:1-5 aloud, slowly. Verse 2 makes a claim: Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Somewhere, someone taught this exact principle and built it into a prayer said by billions of people every day. Search Matthew 6:9-15 and find it. What do you notice about verses 14-15?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matthew 6:12). And then the remarkable detail: of all seven petitions of the Our Father, forgiveness is the only one Jesus stops to underline afterward: if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (6:14-15). Jesus gives the forgiveness petition unique weight, pausing to explain it alone.

Let someone say it: Ben Sira wrote this about two hundred years before the Sermon on the Mount. God was teaching his people this mercy-logic long before the Incarnation, and the Word made flesh sealed it.

5. Read Sirach 28:3-4 again (does a man harbor anger against another, and yet seek for healing from the Lord?) and then Matthew 18:23-35, the unforgiving servant. How does Jesus' parable dramatize Ben Sira's question? Look at the numbers in the parable: what point do they make?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

The servant is forgiven ten thousand talents, an absurd, unpayable sum, and immediately throttles a fellow servant over a hundred denarii, perhaps a few months' wages. The ratio is the sermon: what God forgives each of us is so disproportionate to anything we are asked to forgive that cherishing the smaller debt while pocketing the larger pardon is grotesque. Ben Sira asked the question; Jesus stages it and ends it with a warning that should stop our breath: so also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

Pastoral note to state plainly here: forgiveness is a decision of the will, empowered by grace, to release the debt to God and will the person's good. It is not saying the wound did not matter, not excusing, not automatic trust, and not always reconciliation, which takes two. For deep wounds it is usually a process, sometimes a long one, and seeking help is strength, not failure. God does not ask us to pretend; he asks us

to hand him the gavel.

6. Read Sirach 28:12-18, the anatomy of the destroying tongue. Gather the images: the spark blown into flame, what the ancient idiom calls the third tongue, rendered Slander in the RSV2CE (28:14), that has shaken many and destroyed cities. Then hear James 3:5-6. What is the wisdom tradition insisting we understand about the size of words versus the size of their damage?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

If you blow on a spark, it will glow; if you spit on it, it will die: the same mouth does both (28:12). This third tongue, gossip standing as a third party between two people, has destroyed strong cities, overthrown the houses of great men, driven virtuous women from their homes, and deprived them of the fruits of their toil (28:14-15). James inherits the whole picture: the tongue is a little member, a fire, staining the whole body. The insistence: never measure a word by its size. A spark is small; the forest is not. Speech is the most disproportionate power God gave us.

7. Finally, read 28:24-26. Ben Sira ends not with despair but with engineering: what does he tell us to build, and what does the balance-and-scales image for weighing words suggest as a daily practice?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

As you fence in your property with thorns, so make a door and a bolt for your mouth; as you bind up your silver and gold, make balances and scales for your words. Fences, doors, bolts, scales: speech is to be secured like treasure and weighed like currency, deliberately, before it leaves the vault. A daily practice: the three gates question before speaking or posting: is it true, is it kind, is it necessary, and, from 19:13-17, have I asked the person themselves?

## Dig Deeper

**DIG DEEPER: Detraction versus calumny**

The Catechism's distinctions sharpen Ben Sira. Calumny is saying false things that harm a reputation. Detraction is saying true things, without an objectively valid reason, that harm a reputation (CCC 2477). Truth is not a defense for gossip. Valid reasons exist (protecting the innocent, reporting crimes, seeking counsel), which is Ben Sira's own exception in 19:8.

**DIG DEEPER: The Our Father's dangerous petition**

St. Cyprian (On the Lord's Prayer, 22-23) and the Catechism both note that forgive us as we forgive is the petition by which we set the terms of our own judgment every time we pray. CCC 2840 puts it soberly: the outpouring of God's mercy cannot penetrate our hearts as long as we have not forgiven those who have trespassed against us. Mercy is not earned by forgiving; it is received through the same open hand that releases.

## Send: Taking It Out

**Send 1.** Whose name came to mind tonight during Sirach 28:2? You do not have to say it aloud. What is one step, however small, toward releasing that debt to God this week?

**Send 2.** What is your spark habit: the group chat, the eye-roll retelling, the anonymous comment? What would a door and a bolt look like for it?

## Live It This Week

- Pray the Our Father slowly once a day, pausing at forgive us our trespasses as we forgive, and name the person silently in the pause.
- Fast completely this week from one specific speech habit you identified (a chat thread, a topic, a person you talk about). Notice what the silence surfaces.
- If you heard a damaging report about someone recently, apply 19:13-17: go to the person kindly, or bury it for good. And if it involves abuse, crime, or danger to anyone, take it promptly to the appropriate authorities instead (19:8).

## Closing Prayer

*Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Make a door and a bolt for our mouths, scales for our words, and in our chests, hearts too full of your mercy to have room for cherished wrath. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## Scripture Memory Verse

"Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray." (**Sirach 28:2**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 6:5-17. Make a private list of your three closest friends and hold it next to the passage.

## SESSION 4: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

### Session 4: The Tongue, the Spark, and the Sins We Hold

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 5:9-6:1
7. Sirach 19:6-12
8. Sirach 19:13-17
9. Matthew 18:15 (within discussion)
10. Sirach 28:1-5
11. Matthew 6:9-15
12. Sirach 28:3-4
13. Matthew 18:23-35
14. Sirach 28:12-18
15. James 3:5-6
16. Sirach 28:24-26
17. James 1:19 (leader reference)
18. CCC 2477-2479, 2838-2845 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 28:2, "Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray."



# Take-Home for Session 4: The Tongue, the Spark, and the Sins We Hold

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- The double-tongued person, saying different things to different audiences, ends in disgrace because trust cannot fasten to a person with no fixed weight (5:9-6:1).
- Ben Sira's ethic of hearing: bury reports rather than broadcast them, presume innocence, and go directly to the person (19:6-17); Jesus likewise commands direct, private correction when a brother sins against you (Matthew 18:15).
- The discovery: the Our Father teaches the very principle of Sirach 28:2, and Jesus underlines that petition alone (Matthew 6:12, 14-15), and dramatizes it in the unforgiving servant, whose forgiven debt dwarfs the one he refuses to release.
- A spark glows when you blow on it (28:12), and James says the tongue sets whole forests ablaze (James 3:5-6): so build a door and a bolt for your mouth and make scales for your words (28:24-26). Forgiveness is a grace-empowered decision of the will, not a feeling, and deep wounds may need time and help.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine of Hippo

Augustine had a warning carved into his dining table: whoever loves to gnaw at the life of the absent should know this table is closed to him. His biographer St. Possidius records that he enforced the rule even on visiting bishops. For the Doctor of Grace, the reputation of the absent was sacred ground, guarded at the very place where talk flows easiest.

*St. Possidius, Life of St. Augustine, 22 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Philip Neri

A story handed down about the Apostle of Rome tells of a penitent given an unusual penance for gossip: pluck a chicken while walking through town, then go back and collect every feather. The scattered feathers, impossible to regather, were the point. Whether or not every detail is historical, the Church has retold it for centuries because it is exactly true to life.

*Traditional story of St. Philip Neri (as handed down)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Francis de Sales

The gentle Doctor devotes chapters of the Introduction to the Devout Life to speech: never speak evil of another without true charitable necessity, he counsels, for detraction is a kind of murder committed against a neighbor's honor, and the tongue that slanders kills three souls with one blow. His remedy is deliberate, habitual kindness of speech.

*Introduction to the Devout Life, Part III, ch. 29 (paraphrased)*

## **Live It This Week**

- Pray the Our Father slowly once a day, pausing at forgive us our trespasses as we forgive, and name the person silently in the pause.
- Fast completely this week from one specific speech habit you identified (a chat thread, a topic, a person you talk about). Notice what the silence surfaces.
- If you heard a damaging report about someone recently, apply 19:13-17: go to the person kindly, or bury it for good. And if it involves abuse, crime, or danger to anyone, take it promptly to the appropriate authorities instead (19:8).

## **Scripture Memory Verse**

"Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray." (**Sirach 28:2**)

## **Before Next Session**

Read Sirach 6:5-17. Make a private list of your three closest friends and hold it next to the passage.

## **Catechism References**

CCC 2477-2479; CCC 2838-2845

## SESSION 5: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 5: A Faithful Friend Is a Sturdy Shelter

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**Passage:** Sirach 6:5-17; 9:10-16; 12:8-18; 13:1-13; 37:1-6

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers Ben Sira's realistic doctrine of friendship: how to test it, what counterfeits look like, why the fear of the Lord is its surest foundation, and how Jesus transforms friendship by calling his disciples friends.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Charity as friendship with God (St. Thomas Aquinas) and chastity blossoming in friendship (CCC 2347).

#### What You Need to Know

Ben Sira gives us one of Scripture's most extensive and shrewd treatments of friendship. Tonight's core text, 6:5-17, moves through three stages: the caution stage (let those who are at peace with you be many, but let your advisers be one in a thousand, 6:6), the testing stage (when you gain a friend, gain him through testing, and do not trust him hastily, 6:7), and the treasure stage, verses that stand among Scripture's best known on friendship: a faithful friend is a sturdy shelter: he that has found one has found a treasure. There is nothing so precious as a faithful friend, and no scales can measure his excellence. A faithful friend is an elixir of life; and those who fear the Lord will find him (6:14-16).

That last clause is the theological heart: those who fear the Lord will find him, because whoever fears the Lord directs his friendship aright, for as he is, so is his neighbor also (6:17). Friendship, for Ben Sira, is not luck; it flows from character, and character flows from the fear of the Lord. Two people both oriented to God are oriented to each other, like two points aligned to the same star. This is the session where the study's fear-of-the-Lord thread turns visibly practical.

The supporting passages add realism: fair-weather friends who are friends of the table and vanish in your day of trouble (6:8-12; 37:1-6 with the friend who becomes an enemy); the danger of enemies pretending friendship (12:8-18); and the frank sociology of 13:1-13 (he who touches pitch will be defiled; associations shape us). The New Testament capstone the group will discover: Jesus at the Last Supper, no longer do I call you servants but friends (John 15:13-15), with greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. For Christians, the faithful friend of Sirach 6:14 has a face.

#### OT Roots and Fulfillment

The gold-standard Old Testament friendship is David and Jonathan: the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul (1 Samuel 18:1-4), a covenant friendship sealed with Jonathan's own robe and armor and proven when it cost Jonathan the throne. Proverbs supplies the aphoristic stream Ben Sira swims in: a friend loves at all times (17:17), there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother (18:24), faithful are the wounds of a friend (27:6), iron sharpens iron (27:17).

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Aelred of Rievaulx

The twelfth-century Cistercian wrote the Church's classic treatise on the subject, *Spiritual Friendship*, teaching that true friendship must begin in Christ, continue in Christ, and be perfected in Christ. He dared to gloss St. John: he who abides in friendship abides in God, and God in him, because genuine friendship is a school of charity and a foretaste of heaven.

*Spiritual Friendship, Books I and III (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas defines charity itself as a certain friendship of man with God, grounded in God sharing his own happiness with us (q. 23, a. 1), and ranks charity the most excellent of the virtues (a. 6). If charity is friendship with God, then human friendships lived in grace become, so to speak, apprenticeships in it: which is why the saints treat friendship as serious spiritual business rather than social garnish.

*Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 23, aa. 1 and 6 (paraphrased, with application)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Bosco

The great friend of the young told his boys, in his famous Letter from Rome, that it is not enough to love the young: they must know that they are loved. His Preventive System, built on reason, religion, and loving-kindness, formed saints in a family atmosphere of holy friendship: a companion, in his school, was someone who helped you toward heaven.

*Letter from Rome, 10 May 1884, and the Preventive System writings (paraphrased)*

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 2347:** Chastity blossoms in friendship; friendship represents a great good for all and leads to spiritual communion.
- **CCC 1829:** The fruits of charity are joy, peace, and mercy; charity demands beneficence and fraternal correction and is friendship and communion.

## Thread Watch

- **DEVELOP** (Fear of the Lord): 6:16-17 makes the thread concrete: those who fear the Lord find faithful friends, because the fear of the Lord forms the very character that faithful friendship requires. Name the thread aloud when the group reaches verse 16.

## Session Goals

1. Distinguish Ben Sira's three circles: the many at peace with you, the tested friend, the one-in-a-thousand adviser (6:6).
2. Understand testing a friendship (6:7-13) as prudence, not cynicism, and identify the fair-weather counterfeits.
3. Reach the treasure verses (6:14-17) and see why the fear of the Lord is friendship's foundation.

4. Discover Jesus calling his disciples friends (John 15:13-15) as the fulfillment of Sirach 6:14.
5. Audit one's own friendships honestly and commit to one act of faithful friendship this week.

### **Time Note**

90 minutes, comfortable. If running long, cut Build question 5 (13:1-13 on associations) to its final application sentence. Keep John 15 unhurried; it is the summit.

## SESSION 5: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 5: A Faithful Friend Is a Sturdy Shelter

#### Opening Prayer

*Lord Jesus, you called your disciples friends and laid down your life for them. Teach us tonight what friendship is worth, how it is tested, and how it is kept. Give us the fear of the Lord that directs friendship aright, and make us the faithful friends we hope to find. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** Describe a moment a friend showed up for you when it actually cost them something. What did it change between you?

**Win 2.** We have hundreds of contacts and followers. Honestly: how many people could you call at 3 a.m.? Is that number rising or falling?

#### Build: Into the Text

**1.** Read Sirach 6:5-7. Ben Sira draws circles of decreasing size: those at peace with you (many), advisers (one in a thousand), and friends gained through testing. Is this cold-blooded? What is he protecting by telling us not to trust hastily?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

It is prudence, not coldness: be warm to many, but do not hand the keys of your soul to the untested. He is protecting the treasury: your confidences, your formation, your heart. Trust extended hastily and betrayed produces the cynicism that later refuses to trust at all; trust extended wisely and honored produces the sturdy shelter of verse 14. Slow trust is how deep trust becomes possible.

**2.** Read 6:8-13, the catalogue of counterfeit friends: the friend when it suits him, the friend who becomes an enemy and reveals your quarrel, the table companion who vanishes in your day of trouble. Which counterfeit is most common in our world, and how does each one fail the definition of friendship?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Each counterfeit loves something you have (your usefulness, your table, your status) rather than you, so when the asset disappears, so does the friend. The table companion is probably our era's most common form: abundant company for the good times, an empty room in the hard ones. The test each fails is trouble: in your day of trouble they will not stand by you (6:10). Trouble is the assay that tells gold from plate, exactly like the furnace of Session 2.

**3.** Now read the treasure verses, 6:14-17, aloud, slowly. Gather the three images of verses 14-16: shelter, treasure, elixir of life. What does each image claim friendship does for a human life? Then look hard at verses 16b-17: who finds this friend, and what reason does verse 17 give?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

A sturdy shelter: protection, a place to survive weather you could not survive exposed. A treasure beyond scales: wealth of a kind money cannot denominate. An elixir (literally a medicine) of life: friendship as healing, life-extending remedy. And the finder: those who fear the Lord will find him, for whoever fears the Lord directs his friendship aright, for as he is, so is his neighbor also. The logic: the fear of the Lord forms your character, your character determines what you seek and what you attract, and two lives aimed at God converge. Faithful friendship is downstream of holiness.

Thread moment: say it plainly: here is our fear-of-the-Lord thread paying rent in the most practical currency imaginable, the question of who will actually be beside you in twenty years.

**LIVE DISCOVERY**

4. Israel has a famous friendship that checks every Sirach box. Someone find and read 1 Samuel 18:1-4, and someone else 1 Samuel 23:15-18. What did Jonathan's friendship with David cost him, and what did Jonathan do for David in the wilderness that only a faithful friend could do?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Jonathan, the crown prince, strips off his own robe, armor, sword, bow, and belt and gives them to David: a covenant gift long read as royal self-divestment, since David, not Jonathan, will one day be king. Later, with David hunted by Jonathan's own father, Jonathan goes to him in the wilderness and strengthened his hand in God, telling him you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. He is the friend of the day of trouble, the shelter, at the cost of his own throne. Read through Sirach 6:16-17, his friendship was directed aright even against his own dynasty.

5. Read Sirach 13:1: he who touches pitch will be defiled, and he who associates with a proud man will become like him. And 9:14-16: let righteous men be your dinner companions. Is Ben Sira telling us to abandon non-Christian friends? How do we hold this together with Jesus eating with sinners?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

No. Ben Sira states a formation law, not a quarantine order: we become like our closest companions, so choose the inner circle (the advisers, the dinner-companion level) for holiness. Jesus ate with sinners as physician and savior, but chose the Twelve for constant companionship, and drew Peter, James, and John closer still. The practical synthesis: love everyone, evangelize widely, and be honest about which direction influence flows in each relationship. If every close friendship is pulling you downhill, that is not mission; it is drift.

6. Read Sirach 37:1-6, the false friend in wartime, ending with do not forget a friend during the battle (37:6). Then the summit: read John 15:13-15. What does Jesus say is the greatest love, what does he call his disciples, and what reason does he give for the name change? How does Jesus fulfill and surpass everything Sirach taught us tonight?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. No longer servants but

friends, because all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you: friendship defined by total self-disclosure and total self-gift. For Christians, the faithful friend of Sirach 6:14 is fulfilled preeminently in Jesus: the sturdy shelter in whom we survive the storm, the treasure of great price, and, in the Church's ancient Eucharistic language, the medicine of life given in his Body and Blood. And he does not forget his friends in the battle: he enters it and dies in their place. Every human friendship in grace is now an apprenticeship in his.

Aquinas' point belongs here: charity itself is friendship with God. The fear of the Lord that finds faithful friends matures into the friendship with God that is heaven begun.

## Dig Deeper

### **DIG DEEPER: An elixir of life**

The Greek behind elixir of life in 6:16 is literally a medicine or remedy of life. St. Ignatius of Antioch, around AD 107, called the Eucharist the medicine of immortality (Letter to the Ephesians, 20). The vocabulary is a quiet arrow pointing where Session 8 will take us: the Friend who gives himself as medicine.

### **DIG DEEPER: Spiritual friendship is not exclusivity**

St. Aelred insists that true friendship begins in Christ, continues in Christ, and is perfected in Christ (Spiritual Friendship, Book I); a friendship curved in on itself, hoarding its warmth, has begun to forget its source. Spiritual friendship stays open: it prays for others, welcomes the lonely, and multiplies. A good audit question for any close friendship: does it make us both more generous to the people outside it?

## Send: Taking It Out

**Send 1.** Run tonight's assay honestly: of your closest friendships, which are shelters, and which are table companionships? What does the answer ask of you (not of them)?

**Send 2.** Sirach says as he is, so is his neighbor: your friendships are a mirror of your own soul's direction. What is the mirror showing this season?

## Live It This Week

- Do one act of day-of-trouble friendship this week: show up, uninvited if necessary, for a friend who is in the battle.
- Write a short note (paper, not text, if you can) to one faithful friend naming specifically what their friendship has been to you: shelter, treasure, or medicine.
- Pray for your three closest friends by name each day this week, and ask the Lord to direct your friendship aright.

## Closing Prayer

*Lord Jesus, faithful friend, sturdy shelter, treasure beyond scales, medicine of life: thank you for calling us friends and laying down your life for us. Form in us the fear of the Lord that directs friendship aright, and knit our souls to companions who will walk with us all the way home. Amen.*



## Scripture Memory Verse

"A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter: he that has found one has found a treasure." (**Sirach 6:14**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 4:1-10 and Sirach 31:1-11, in that order.

## SESSION 5: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

### Session 5: A Faithful Friend Is a Sturdy Shelter

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 6:5-7
7. Sirach 6:8-13
8. Sirach 6:14-17
9. 1 Samuel 18:1-4
10. 1 Samuel 23:15-18
11. Sirach 13:1
12. Sirach 9:14-16
13. Sirach 37:1-6
14. John 15:13-15
15. Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; 27:6, 17 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 6:14, "A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter: he that has found one has found a treasure."

# Take-Home for Session 5: A Faithful Friend Is a Sturdy Shelter

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- Ben Sira's circles: warm peace with many, tested trust with few, one-in-a-thousand advisers (6:6-7). Slow trust is how deep trust becomes possible.
- Counterfeit friends love your assets, not you, and vanish in the day of trouble (6:8-13): trouble is friendship's testing fire, the same furnace logic as 2:5.
- A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter, a treasure, an elixir of life, and those who fear the Lord will find him, because character aimed at God converges with character aimed at God (6:14-17). Jonathan proved it at the cost of a throne.
- Jesus fulfills the whole teaching: no longer servants but friends, and greater love has no one than to lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13-15).

## Voices of the Church

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Aelred of Rievaulx**

The twelfth-century Cistercian wrote the Church's classic treatise on the subject, *Spiritual Friendship*, teaching that true friendship must begin in Christ, continue in Christ, and be perfected in Christ. He dared to gloss St. John: he who abides in friendship abides in God, and God in him, because genuine friendship is a school of charity and a foretaste of heaven.

*Spiritual Friendship, Books I and III (paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thomas Aquinas**

Aquinas defines charity itself as a certain friendship of man with God, grounded in God sharing his own happiness with us (q. 23, a. 1), and ranks charity the most excellent of the virtues (a. 6). If charity is friendship with God, then human friendships lived in grace become, so to speak, apprenticeships in it: which is why the saints treat friendship as serious spiritual business rather than social garnish.

*Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 23, aa. 1 and 6 (paraphrased, with application)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Bosco**

The great friend of the young told his boys, in his famous Letter from Rome, that it is not enough to love the young: they must know that they are loved. His Preventive System, built on reason, religion, and loving-kindness, formed saints in a family atmosphere of holy friendship: a companion, in his school, was someone who helped you toward heaven.

*Letter from Rome, 10 May 1884, and the Preventive System writings (paraphrased)*

## **Live It This Week**

- Do one act of day-of-trouble friendship this week: show up, uninvited if necessary, for a friend who is in the battle.
- Write a short note (paper, not text, if you can) to one faithful friend naming specifically what their friendship has been to you: shelter, treasure, or medicine.
- Pray for your three closest friends by name each day this week, and ask the Lord to direct your friendship aright.

## **Scripture Memory Verse**

"A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter: he that has found one has found a treasure." (**Sirach 6:14**)

## **Before Next Session**

Read Sirach 4:1-10 and Sirach 31:1-11, in that order.

## **Catechism References**

CCC 2347; CCC 1829

## SESSION 6: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 6: Stretch Out Your Hand to the Poor

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**Passage:** Sirach 4:1-10; 29:8-13; 31:1-11; 35:9-11

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers Ben Sira's economics of mercy: the cry of the poor reaches God's ear, gold is a test in which many come to ruin, and generosity is a treasury that rescues, and finds Jesus teaching the same treasury in Luke 12.

**Catholic Touchstone:** The Church's love for the poor and the works of mercy (CCC 2443-2449).

#### What You Need to Know

Tonight develops the thread planted in Session 3. Sirach 4:1-10 gives the negative and positive poles: do not cheat the poor of their living or grieve the hungry (4:1-3), because if the embittered poor man curses you in his distress, his Creator will hear his prayer (4:5-6): God has taken sides in advance, and it is not with the withholder. Positively: be like a father to orphans, and instead of a husband to their mother; you will then be like a son of the Most High, and he will love you more than does your mother (4:10). Imitating God's care for the defenseless makes a person resemble God's own Son: language that should raise Christian eyebrows.

Sirach 29:8-13 gives the study's central financial image: lose your silver for the sake of a brother or a friend. Lay up your treasure according to the commandments of the Most High, and it will profit you more than gold. Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from all affliction (29:10-12). The group will discover Jesus teaching the identical image: sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail (Luke 12:33), and the Matthew 6 treasure teaching. Ben Sira's treasury of almsgiving becomes Jesus' treasure in heaven, and the sheep and goats (Matthew 25) reveal what the treasury contained all along: Christ himself, met in the least of these.

Sirach 31:1-11 balances the message: wealth itself is not condemned, but gold is a stumbling block and a test: who has been tested by it and been found perfect? Let it be for him a ground for boasting (31:9-10, RSV numbering). The rich man who passes the test, found blameless and not going after gold, is called blessed. Ben Sira is neither a prosperity preacher nor an anti-wealth zealot: money is a servant that constantly campaigns to be a master, and almsgiving is how the master reminds it who works for whom. Finally 35:9-11: with every gift show a cheerful face, the verse behind St. Paul's God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).

#### OT Roots and Fulfillment

The Torah's floor: open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor (Deuteronomy 15:11), the gleaning laws (Leviticus 19:9-10), and the warning that the oppressed worker's cry reaches God (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). Proverbs 19:17: he who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord. Tobit 4:7-11 and 12:9 teach the treasury of almsgiving in nearly Ben Sira's words. The prophets thunder the same: is not this the fast that I choose... to share your bread with the hungry? (Isaiah 58:6-7).

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Basil the Great

Preaching on the rich fool's barns, Basil delivered lines the Church has never forgotten: the bread you hold back belongs to the hungry, the cloak in your closet to the naked, the shoes rotting in your possession to the barefoot, the silver you have buried to the needy. For Basil, failing to give from surplus is not merely a lack of generosity but a kind of theft from the poor.

*Homily on Luke 12:18, I Will Tear Down My Barns (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Chrysostom

Chrysostom told his people not to honor Christ in the church with silks while neglecting him shivering and naked outside in the poor. The Christ of the altar and the Christ of the beggar are the same Christ, he preached, and the second is the test of whether we have recognized the first.

*Homily 50 on Matthew (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Teresa of Calcutta

The saint of the gutters of Calcutta said she saw Jesus in every suffering person, in his distressing disguise, and taught her sisters that in serving the poorest of the poor they were touching the body of Christ, doing it, as he said, to me. Her whole life was Matthew 25 taken literally.

*Her letters, collected in Come Be My Light (paraphrased)*

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 2443-2447:** God blesses those who come to the aid of the poor; the works of mercy, and among them almsgiving to the poor as a chief witness to fraternal charity.
- **CCC 2448:** Human misery in all its forms elicited the compassion of Christ, who identified himself with the least of his brethren.

## Thread Watch

- **DEVELOP AND LARGELY RESOLVE** (Almsgiving and atonement): Session 3 planted the claim; tonight the group sees the whole biblical architecture: the poor man's cry heard by God, the treasury of alms, and Jesus revealing that the treasury's contents are himself (Matthew 25). Session 9 will add one final echo in worship.
- **TEND** (Fear of the Lord): 4:10's promise (you will be like a son of the Most High) previews the family logic of mercy: children resemble their Father.

## Session Goals

1. Feel the edge of 4:1-6: the poor man's cry is heard, and God has taken his side in advance.
2. Unpack 4:10: mercy to the defenseless makes a person resemble the Most High as a son.
3. Trace the treasury of almsgiving (29:8-13) and discover Jesus teaching the same treasury (Luke 12:33; Matthew 6:19-21).

4. Hold Ben Sira's balance on wealth (31:1-11): not condemned, but a test few pass.
5. Move from discussion to budget: each participant plans one concrete, costly act of mercy.

### **Time Note**

90 minutes. Pre-chosen cuts: Build question 5 (31:1-11) can compress to reading 31:8-11 with one question; the cheerful-giver question 6 can merge into Live It. Protect the Luke 12 and Matthew 25 discoveries.

## SESSION 6: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 6: Stretch Out Your Hand to the Poor

#### Opening Prayer

*Father of the poor, your ear is turned to the cry of the needy and your Son wears their face. Unstop our ears tonight, uncurl our hands, and teach us to lay up treasure where you keep yours. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** What is the most generous thing anyone has ever done for you? How did it feel to be on the receiving end?

**Win 2.** When you pass someone asking for money, what is the conversation inside your head? (Honesty over piety, please.)

#### Build: Into the Text

**1.** Read Sirach 4:1-6. Verse 5 tells us not to give a man occasion to curse you, because his Creator will hear his prayer (4:6). What is startling about whose prayer God promises to hear here, and what does it reveal about where God has positioned himself in the economy?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

God promises to hear the embittered curse of a poor man against the one who withheld from him. Not a saint's prayer: a bitter man's cry. God has positioned himself with the poor in advance, as their Creator who hears, defends, and judges, just as he promises in Exodus 22:22-23 (if you afflict the widow and orphan and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry). The practical upshot: how I treat the poor is never a private economic choice; it is conducted entirely within God's earshot.

**2.** Read 4:10 slowly: be like a father to orphans, and instead of a husband to their mother; you will then be like a son of the Most High. Why does imitating this particular kind of care make someone resemble God's son? Where does Jesus teach the same family logic?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Because this is what the Father himself does: Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation (Psalm 68:5). Children resemble their father by doing what he does; take up the defenseless and you are unmistakably his. Jesus teaches the identical logic in the Sermon on the Mount: love your enemies... so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:44-45); blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy (5:7), and blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God (5:9). Mercy is the family resemblance.

**3.** Read Sirach 29:8-13. Ben Sira gives financial advice that no adviser would sign off on: lose your silver for the sake of a brother, store up almsgiving in your treasury. What is he claiming this treasury does (29:12-13), and in what sense could that possibly be true?



**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

It will rescue you from all affliction; more than a mighty shield and a heavy spear, it will fight on your behalf against your enemy. Claims: alms given are not lost but deposited, and the deposit actively defends the giver. True in what sense? Partly in this life (the generous build the very bonds of community that catch them when they fall, and mercy shown returns as mercy: Sirach 3:14, Session 3), and read canonically, Ben Sira's words reach further than he could yet see, toward a treasury God himself keeps: which is exactly where the next question goes.

**LIVE DISCOVERY**

4. Someone taught this treasury doctrine again, two centuries later, almost word for word, and raised the stakes. Find and read Luke 12:32-34, then Matthew 6:19-21. What does Jesus tell us to do with possessions, what does he promise it produces, and what does his final line (where your treasure is, there will your heart be also) add to Ben Sira?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail. Do not lay up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume; lay up treasures in heaven. Jesus confirms the treasury is real and locates it: in heaven, beyond moths, rust, thieves, and market crashes. His addition is the heart-tracking principle: treasure drags the heart behind it wherever it is deposited. Give to heaven and your heart migrates to heaven; hoard on earth and your heart is buried alive here. Almsgiving turns out to be heart-relocation surgery.

Let someone connect the arc: Sirach 29 to Luke 12 is one continuous stream of teaching, gathered up and surpassed by the Teacher.

5. Read Sirach 31:5-11 (he who loves gold will not be justified... who has been tested by it and found perfect?). Ben Sira treats wealth as a test, and says the rich man who passes has a right to boast, for he had the power to transgress and did not. Is wealth good, bad, or something else in this passage? What does passing the test look like concretely?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Wealth is neither good nor evil here: it is an examination, and a hard one (many have come to ruin because of gold, 31:6). The passing grade is described in 31:8: blameless, not going after gold, not trusting in it. Concretely: the man owns the money and the money does not own him, proven by his ability to open his hand (the whole night's teaching) and by where his trust actually rests when the account is threatened. Jesus grades the same exam with the rich young man (Mark 10:17-27) and with the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21), whose barn-building speech could be the villain's monologue for Sirach 31.

6. Read Sirach 35:9-11: with every gift show a cheerful face... give to the Most High as he has given, and as generously as your hand has found. And 2 Corinthians 9:7. Why does the manner of giving matter so much to God, and not just the amount?

**ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

God loves a cheerful giver: Paul and Ben Sira share this wisdom theme (the closest verbal echo behind Paul is the Greek of Proverbs 22:8). The manner matters because almsgiving is not a tax but a family resemblance (4:10): God gives gladly, lavishly, without extortion, and the gift is meant to carry the giver's heart with it, not resentment. A grudging gift feeds a body; a cheerful gift honors a person and worships God. Cheerfulness is also the proof that the treasure-heart surgery is working: joy in giving means the heart has actually started to move.

## Dig Deeper

### **DIG DEEPER: The sheep, the goats, and the treasury opened**

Read Matthew 25:31-46 this week. Notice: neither sheep nor goats knew whom they had served or refused. The treasury of almsgiving (Sirach 29:12) is opened at the judgment and found to contain Christ himself: as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. Every deposit was received personally by the King. One precision worth having ready: Christ is present in the Eucharist substantially and sacramentally, a mode of presence unlike any other; he is encountered in the poor by real identification in charity (as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me). Both presences are real; they are not the same kind (CCC 1374; 2449). And as the saints preached, how we meet him in the poor tests how truly we have met him at the altar.

### **DIG DEEPER: The universal destination of goods**

Behind St. Basil's fierce homily lies a principle the Church still teaches: God gave the earth to the whole human race, so private property, though legitimate and good, is stewarded under a mortgage to the common good (CCC 2402-2406). St. Basil's the bread you hold back belongs to the hungry is deliberately severe preaching about surplus: goods held beyond need stand under the claim of the poor before God (CCC 2402-2406).

## Send: Taking It Out

**Send 1.** Where has money quietly moved from servant to master in your life: a subscription stack, a savings number you check like a mood ring, a purchase pattern? What would demote it?

**Send 2.** Who is the least of these actually within your reach this month: a name, not a category? What do they need that you have?

## Live It This Week

- Make one deposit in the treasury this week that is large enough to feel: money, or hours, given to someone who cannot repay you.
- Give without seeking notice (Matthew 6:3-4), and cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7).
- Read Matthew 25:31-46 once, slowly, and pray: Lord, show me where you have been in my week wearing your distressing disguise.

## Closing Prayer

*Lord Jesus, you were rich yet for our sake became poor, so that by your poverty we might become rich. Teach us to lose our silver for a brother, to lay up treasure where you keep yours, and to meet you, cheerfully, in the least of these. Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.*

## Scripture Memory Verse

"Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from all affliction." (**Sirach 29:12**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 15:11-20 twice, and bring your questions.

## SESSION 6: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

### Session 6: Stretch Out Your Hand to the Poor

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 4:1-6
7. Sirach 4:10
8. Psalm 68:5 (within discussion)
9. Matthew 5:44-45 (within discussion)
10. Sirach 29:8-13
11. Luke 12:32-34
12. Matthew 6:19-21
13. Sirach 31:5-11
14. Sirach 35:9-11
15. 2 Corinthians 9:7
16. Exodus 22:22-23 (leader reference)
17. Matthew 25:31-46 (take-home reading)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 29:12, "Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from all affliction."

# Take-Home for Session 6: Stretch Out Your Hand to the Poor

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- If the wronged poor man cries out even in bitterness, his Creator will hear his prayer (4:1-6): God stands guard over the defenseless in advance; mercy to orphans and widows makes a person like a son of the Most High (4:10), because children resemble their Father.
- Store up almsgiving in your treasury (29:12): alms are deposits, not losses, and Jesus locates the vault: treasure in heaven that does not fail (Luke 12:33-34), warning that the heart follows the treasure wherever it goes.
- Wealth is a test few pass (31:5-11): blessed is the rich man who is found blameless and does not go after gold. Money is a servant that campaigns to be a master; almsgiving demotes it.
- With every gift show a cheerful face (Sirach 35:9), and God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7), because giving is family resemblance, not taxation, and joy is proof the heart has begun to move where the treasure went.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Basil the Great

Preaching on the rich fool's barns, Basil delivered lines the Church has never forgotten: the bread you hold back belongs to the hungry, the cloak in your closet to the naked, the shoes rotting in your possession to the barefoot, the silver you have buried to the needy. For Basil, failing to give from surplus is not merely a lack of generosity but a kind of theft from the poor.

*Homily on Luke 12:18, I Will Tear Down My Barns (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Chrysostom

Chrysostom told his people not to honor Christ in the church with silks while neglecting him shivering and naked outside in the poor. The Christ of the altar and the Christ of the beggar are the same Christ, he preached, and the second is the test of whether we have recognized the first.

*Homily 50 on Matthew (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Teresa of Calcutta

The saint of the gutters of Calcutta said she saw Jesus in every suffering person, in his distressing disguise, and taught her sisters that in serving the poorest of the poor they were touching the body of Christ, doing it, as he said, to me. Her whole life was Matthew 25 taken literally.

*Her letters, collected in Come Be My Light (paraphrased)*

## **Live It This Week**

- Make one deposit in the treasury this week that is large enough to feel: money, or hours, given to someone who cannot repay you.
- Give without seeking notice (Matthew 6:3-4), and cheerfully (2 Corinthians 9:7).
- Read Matthew 25:31-46 once, slowly, and pray: Lord, show me where you have been in my week wearing your distressing disguise.

## **Scripture Memory Verse**

"Store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from all affliction." (**Sirach 29:12**)

## **Before Next Session**

Read Sirach 15:11-20 twice, and bring your questions.

## **Catechism References**

CCC 2443-2447; CCC 2448

## SESSION 7: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 7: He Left Us in the Hand of Our Own Counsel

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**Passage:** Sirach 15:11-20; 17:1-14

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers Scripture's most direct teaching on free will: God does not cause sin, he set fire and water before us, and our choices are real, and learns to hold human freedom and divine grace together the way the Church does.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Man's freedom and responsibility (CCC 1730-1748, where CCC 1730 quotes Sirach 15:14 directly) and grace as God's free initiative that awakens free response (CCC 2002).

#### What You Need to Know

Sirach 15:11-20 is the Bible's most explicit passage on free will, and the Catechism plants its flag on it: CCC 1730 quotes Sirach 15:14, God willed that man should be left in the hand of his own counsel. Ben Sira opens by demolishing the oldest excuse in the world: do not say, Because of the Lord I left the right way (15:11). God does not cause sin: he hates abomination, he commanded no one to be ungodly (15:20). Then the great declaration: it was he who created man in the beginning, and he left him in the power of his own inclination. If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water: stretch out your hand for whichever you wish. Before a man are life and death, and whichever he chooses will be given to him (15:14-17).

Tonight's steelman chain is the study's most demanding, so prepare well. The Reformed objection at full strength: Scripture says we were dead through trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1), that no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him (John 6:44), that it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy (Romans 9:16), and that the mind set on the flesh cannot submit to God's law (Romans 8:7). A dead man does not choose; therefore Sirach's fire-and-water picture flatters fallen man, and this is Pelagianism on parchment. Give that argument its full weight: it is built from real verses and held by serious Christians.

The Catholic answer, for your preparation, is both-and with grace holding the frame. The Church condemned Pelagianism before the Reformers' grandparents were born: no one can take one step toward God without grace preceding, awakening, and assisting (CCC 2001-2002; the Second Council of Orange in 529 taught this against the semi-Pelagians). But grace heals and elevates freedom rather than replacing it: God's free initiative demands man's free response (CCC 2002). Scripture holds both without blinking: work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, FOR God is at work in you, both to will and to work (Philippians 2:12-13): the for joins what the objection splits. Deuteronomy 30:19 (I have set before you life and death... therefore choose life) is Moses making Ben Sira's offer; Joshua 24:15, choose this day whom you will serve; and Jesus at the door: behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door (Revelation 3:20). Dead in sin is real, and so is the knock that raises the dead precisely by being answerable. Grace is not a crane that moves a corpse; it is the voice of Christ that makes Lazarus able to come forth, and Lazarus really comes.

#### OT Roots and Fulfillment

Sirach 15 consciously restates the two great choice-scenes of the Torah: Eden, where the man was given a real command and really able to break it (Genesis 2:16-17), and Moab, where Moses sets before all Israel life and

death, blessing and curse, and pleads choose life (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). Sirach 17:1-14 retells Genesis 1-2: man made from earth, in God's image, given dominion, given eyes, ears, a mind, shown good and evil, and allotted the law of life (17:11). Freedom is not the Fall's residue; it is the image of God in operation (CCC 1705: freedom is an outstanding manifestation of the divine image).

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Justin Martyr

Writing to the Roman emperor around AD 155, Justin insisted that unless the human race has the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions. He saw free will as the necessary ground of all praise, blame, and judgment, and taught that God, foreknowing all, coerces no one.

*First Apology, chs. 43-44 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus taught that God made man free from the beginning, possessing his own power to obey God willingly and not by compulsion, because God is persuasion, not coercion, and there is no virtue in an obedience that could not have been withheld. Love, to be love, must be free.

*Against Heresies, Book IV, ch. 37 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine of Hippo

The Doctor of Grace, who fought Pelagius fiercely, nonetheless wrote an entire treatise on grace and free will against those who so defend grace as to deny freedom. His mature formula holds both: he who created you without you will not justify you without you (Sermon 169). Grace begins, accompanies, and completes every good work, and the will grace heals truly wills: our consent is grace's gift and genuinely our own act.

*On Grace and Free Will; Sermon 169 (paraphrased)*

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1730 and 1705:** God willed that man should be left in the hand of his own counsel (Sirach 15:14, quoted in CCC 1730); freedom is an outstanding manifestation of the divine image (CCC 1705).
- **CCC 1734-1737:** Freedom makes man responsible for his acts; imputability can be diminished by ignorance, duress, fear, and habit.
- **CCC 2001-2002:** The preparation of man for grace is already a work of grace; God's free initiative demands man's free response.

## Thread Watch

- **DEVELOP (Fear of the Lord):** 15:13 (the Lord hates all abominations, and they are not loved by those who fear him) and 15:19 (his eyes are on those who fear him): the fearers of the Lord are the ones whose freedom has learned to love what God loves. Freedom's goal is not open options but a formed heart.

## Session Goals

1. Demolish, with Ben Sira, the blame-God excuse for sin (15:11-13).



2. Establish the fire-and-water teaching of 15:14-17 and its Torah roots (Deuteronomy 30).
3. Present the Reformed objection against free will at genuine full strength.
4. Answer it with the Catholic both-and: grace precedes, freedom responds, and Philippians 2:12-13 joins them.
5. Land the pastoral payoff: your choices are real, grace is available, and no one is fated to sin.

## **Time Note**

90 minutes and dense. Pre-chosen cuts: Build question 2 (17:1-14 creation retelling) can shrink to reading 17:1-7 with one observation; the second Dig Deeper goes home unread. The steelman chain needs 30 minutes; guard it.

## SESSION 7: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 7: He Left Us in the Hand of Our Own Counsel

#### Opening Prayer

*Father, you created us in your image and left us in the hand of our own counsel, and when we chose death you did not abandon us but sent your Son. Tonight give us clear minds for a hard question, honesty toward those who disagree, and hearts that stretch out for the water and not the fire. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** When you were a kid and got caught, what was your go-to excuse? Whom or what did you blame?

**Win 2.** Have you ever heard someone say (or said yourself), God made me this way, or it was just meant to happen, about a moral choice? What work is that sentence doing?

#### Build: Into the Text

**1.** Read Sirach 15:11-13. What excuse does Ben Sira forbid us to say, and what three reasons does he give in these verses for why it cannot be true? Why do you think this excuse is so ancient and so durable?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Forbidden: do not say, Because of the Lord I left the right way, and do not say, It was he who led me astray. Reasons: God does not do what he hates, he has no need of a sinful man, and he hates every abomination. The excuse is durable because it is the oldest one on record: Adam's the woman whom you gave to be with me (Genesis 3:12) blames the woman and, in the same breath, the God who gave her. Blaming God is sin's way of avoiding the mirror.

**2.** Read Sirach 17:1-14, Ben Sira's retelling of creation. List what God gave mankind in verses 1-7 (dominion, strength, image, eyes, ears, a mind, knowledge of good and evil) and verses 11-14 (law, covenant, commandments). Given this inventory, what is a human being equipped to do that no animal is?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

A human being is equipped to know good and evil, to hear a command, and to answer it: to be a covenant partner. The inventory is the anatomy of moral freedom: perception (eyes, ears), deliberation (a mind), moral knowledge (good and evil shown), and a summons (beware of all unrighteousness, 17:14). CCC 1705 draws the conclusion: freedom is an outstanding manifestation of the divine image. We are the animal that can be commanded because we are the animal that can consent.

**3.** Now the centerpiece. Read Sirach 15:14-17 aloud, twice. What exactly is claimed in each verse? Then someone find Deuteronomy 30:15-19 and read it. What is Moses doing on the plains of Moab that Ben Sira is doing in his classroom?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Claimed: God created man and left him in the power of his own inclination (Hebrew: yetzer, his formed disposition); keeping the commandments is possible if you will; fire and water are set before you and your hand does the stretching; life and death stand before you and your choice will be honored. Moses does the identical thing at national scale: I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life. Both texts are covenant summonses: God sets the alternatives, states his own preference without ambiguity (choose life!), and then honors the creature's answer. That is the terrifying dignity of the image of God.

## STEELMAN

4. Now the strongest case against everything we just read. Four readers: Ephesians 2:1, John 6:44, Romans 9:16, Romans 8:7. After each, restate its claim in one sentence. Then build the Reformed argument at full strength: why would a serious Calvinist say Sirach 15 describes man before the Fall at best, and flatters a corpse at worst?

### ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The argument at full strength: You were dead through trespasses and sins: dead, not sick. No one CAN come to me unless the Father draws him: inability, not reluctance. It depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy: the decisive variable is never the human will. The mind of the flesh cannot submit to God's law: cannot, not merely does not. Therefore: a spiritually dead person no more stretches out his hand for water than a corpse chooses breakfast. God must unilaterally regenerate; the will follows. State its most careful form too: classical Reformed theology grants real natural liberty in everyday choices; the claimed inability is specifically the fallen will's power to turn savingly to God without regeneration. Sirach's cheerful if you will is precisely the anthropology Pelagius was condemned for, and its presence here is one more reason this book is not canonical.

Let it stand at full strength. Ask the group: what is strong in this argument? (Answer honestly: its verses are real, and its horror of self-salvation is a Christian horror.) Then turn to the response.

## STEELMAN, PART TWO: THE ANSWER

5. The Catholic answer refuses to amputate either set of verses. Read Philippians 2:12-13 aloud and notice the word that joins verse 12 to verse 13. Then Revelation 3:20 and John 11:43. How does the Church hold total dependence on grace AND real freedom, and why is Sirach 15 innocent of Pelagianism?

### ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Philippians: work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (verse 12, real human working), FOR God is at work in you, both to will and to work, for his good pleasure (verse 13, God working even our willing). The conjunction is for, not but: God's working is the reason our working is possible, not its rival. Revelation 3:20: the risen Christ stands at the door and knocks, and the hearing and opening are ours: a knock is the perfect image of grace that enables without forcing. And Lazarus: dead men cannot respond, yet the voice of Christ (Lazarus, come out) creates the very ability it commands, and Lazarus really comes forth (John 11:43-44). Grace raises the dead precisely by making them able to answer.

The Church's position, defined long before the Reformation (Second Council of Orange, 529; reaffirmed at Trent): fallen man cannot make the first move, cannot believe, cannot even desire God savingly without prevenient grace; Pelagianism is condemned. AND grace does not annihilate the will it heals: God's free initiative demands man's free response (CCC 2002). So the Calvinist is right that the corpse cannot choose,

and the Catholic adds: no human person stands outside God's universal salvific will or beyond the reach of his grace (Titus 2:11, the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men; 1 Timothy 2:4, God desires all men to be saved): God desires all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; CCC 1260), and, as Trent teaches with Augustine, God does not command the impossible, but bids you do what you can and pray for what you cannot (Session 6, ch. 11); whenever anyone turns toward God, even the first flicker of that turning is already grace at work. How grace moves each soul remains a mystery the Church has deliberately left open. Sirach 15 is innocent because Ben Sira is describing man as God's covenant creature, addressed and summoned; and the Church reads every such summons as carried by grace, since in the real order there is no graceless audience for God's word.

Why it matters pastorally: if freedom is an illusion, then my sin was fated and my repentance is theater. Sirach 15:11-13 forbids the first; the Gospel invites the second. Your choices tonight are real, and grace is already underneath them.

6. Read Sirach 15:18-20 to close: the wisdom of the Lord is great... his eyes are on those who fear him... he has not commanded any one to be ungodly. How do God's complete knowledge (15:18-19) and our real freedom (15:14-17) coexist in this passage without embarrassment? What does that model for us?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Ben Sira states both at full volume in adjacent breaths: God sees everything and knows every deed of man (15:18-19), and no one's sin was ever commanded or caused by him. Foreknowledge is not causation: God's eternal sight of my free choice does not make it unfree, any more than my watching a replay causes the goal. The passage models theological nerve: hold everything Scripture says, refuse to sand down either truth to make the system tidier, and worship at the point where they meet. That is the Catholic method, and it is Ben Sira's.

## Dig Deeper

**DIG DEEPER: The Catechism's favorite Sirach verse**

Open CCC 1730 and see it with your own eyes: the paragraph that anchors the Catechism's entire treatment of human freedom quotes Sirach 15:14. When someone says the deuterocanon does not matter doctrinally, here is the Church grounding the doctrine of free will on Ben Sira.

**DIG DEEPER: What diminishes freedom**

The Church is not naive about how wounded freedom is. CCC 1735 lists what can diminish or even nullify responsibility: ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, immoderate attachments, and other psychological or social factors. Real freedom, really wounded, really healed by grace: all three clauses are Catholic doctrine, and dropping any one of them distorts the picture.

## Send: Taking It Out

**Send 1.** Where in your life have you been quietly running the Sirach 15:11 excuse: this is just how God made me, this is just my personality, it was going to happen anyway? What does the fire-and-water picture do to that script?

**Send 2.** Christ is at the door, knocking, awakening and enabling your answer (Revelation 3:20). What is the door in this season, the specific choice where the knock is loudest?

## Live It This Week

- Memorize the memory verse and pray it each morning as a declaration over the day's choices: If you will, you can keep the commandments.
- Identify your one recurring fire, the choice you keep stretching toward, and put one concrete obstacle between your hand and it this week (an app deleted, a route changed, an accountability text).
- Read CCC 1730-1742 (ten minutes) and mark the sentence that most surprises you; bring it next week.

## Closing Prayer

*Lord, you have set before us fire and water, life and death, and you have told us plainly which to choose. Send your grace before us, beneath us, and within us, so that willing what you will, we may stretch out our hands for life. Through Christ our Lord, who stands at the door and knocks. Amen.*

## Scripture Memory Verse

"If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice." (**Sirach 15:15**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 24 twice, and bring your sealed My Guess sheet from Session 1.

## SESSION 7: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

### Session 7: He Left Us in the Hand of Our Own Counsel

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 15:11-13
7. Sirach 17:1-14
8. Sirach 15:14-17
9. Deuteronomy 30:15-19
10. Ephesians 2:1
11. John 6:44
12. Romans 9:16
13. Romans 8:7
14. Philippians 2:12-13
15. Revelation 3:20
16. John 11:43
17. Sirach 15:18-20
18. Genesis 3:12 (within discussion)
19. Titus 2:11 and CCC 1730, 2001-2002 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 15:15, "If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice."

# Take-Home for Session 7: He Left Us in the Hand of Our Own Counsel

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- The oldest excuse (because of the Lord I left the right way) is forbidden: God hates sin, causes no one's sin, and commanded no one to be ungodly (15:11-13, 20).
- The centerpiece: God created man and left him in the hand of his own counsel; fire and water, life and death are set before us, and whichever we choose will be given (15:14-17); Moses' Deuteronomy 30 summons restated, and the verse the Catechism itself quotes to ground human freedom (CCC 1730).
- We held Scripture's full witness together and found the Catholic both-and: grace absolutely precedes and enables (Orange, 529; CCC 2001-2002), and grace heals freedom rather than replacing it: work out your salvation, FOR God is at work in you (Philippians 2:12-13). The knock is his; grace awakens and strengthens our hand; the response is truly ours: and his voice gives even the dead the power to come forth.
- God's all-seeing knowledge and our real freedom stand side by side without embarrassment (15:18-20; CCC 600): hold both, stand down neither, worship where they meet.

## Voices of the Church

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Justin Martyr**

Writing to the Roman emperor around AD 155, Justin insisted that unless the human race has the power of avoiding evil and choosing good by free choice, they are not accountable for their actions. He saw free will as the necessary ground of all praise, blame, and judgment, and taught that God, foreknowing all, coerces no one.

*First Apology, chs. 43-44 (paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Irenaeus of Lyons**

Irenaeus taught that God made man free from the beginning, possessing his own power to obey God willingly and not by compulsion, because God is persuasion, not coercion, and there is no virtue in an obedience that could not have been withheld. Love, to be love, must be free.

*Against Heresies, Book IV, ch. 37 (paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Augustine of Hippo**

The Doctor of Grace, who fought Pelagius fiercely, nonetheless wrote an entire treatise on grace and free will against those who so defend grace as to deny freedom. His mature formula holds both: he who created you without you will not justify you without you (Sermon 169). Grace begins, accompanies, and completes every good work, and the will grace heals truly wills: our consent is grace's gift and genuinely our own act.

*On Grace and Free Will; Sermon 169 (paraphrased)*

## **Live It This Week**

- Memorize the memory verse and pray it each morning as a declaration over the day's choices: If you will, you can keep the commandments.
- Identify your one recurring fire, the choice you keep stretching toward, and put one concrete obstacle between your hand and it this week (an app deleted, a route changed, an accountability text).
- Read CCC 1730-1742 (ten minutes) and mark the sentence that most surprises you; bring it next week.

## **Scripture Memory Verse**

"If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice." (**Sirach 15:15**)

## **Before Next Session**

Read Sirach 24 twice, and bring your sealed My Guess sheet from Session 1.

## **Catechism References**

CCC 1730 and 1705; CCC 1734-1737; CCC 2001-2002



## SESSION 8: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 8: Come to Me: Wisdom's Banquet

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**Passage:** Sirach 24:1-34

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group opens the sealed guesses and discovers where Wisdom's portrait was always pointing: Sirach's personified Wisdom, God's created and communicated wisdom given to Israel in Torah and worship, points beyond itself and is fulfilled without remainder in Christ, the eternal and uncreated Wisdom and Word of the Father, who tabernacled among us and gives himself as the Bread of Life.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Christ the Wisdom and Word of God (CCC 240-241; John 1) and the Eucharist as the banquet in which Christ gives himself (CCC 1324, 1336).

#### What You Need to Know

Tonight is the summit of the study and the resolution of the sealed guess. Sirach 24 is Wisdom's own speech, delivered in the assembly of the Most High (24:2). Track her autobiography with the group: I came forth from the mouth of the Most High (24:3): she is God's Word, his breath, his utterance. She covered the earth like a mist (24:3; hear the mist of Genesis 2:6 and the creation scene of Genesis 1:2) and traversed heaven, the abyss, and every nation (24:4-6): she is present to all creation. Then the astonishing turn: the Creator of all things commands her, make your dwelling in Jacob (24:8), and the Greek verb behind it means to pitch one's tent, to tabernacle. She ministered before him in the holy tabernacle in Zion (24:10): Wisdom serves in Israel's liturgy. Created from the beginning, before the ages (24:9), she takes root in Jerusalem and flourishes like every glorious tree Ben Sira can name (24:12-17).

Then the invitation that resolves our study's central thread: Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my produce... Those who eat me will hunger for more, and those who drink me will thirst for more (24:19-21). Wisdom feeds people with herself. Ben Sira, writing before Christ, lands the identification available to him: all this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law which Moses commanded us (24:23): Wisdom is encountered in Torah. He is right, and he is standing at a door he cannot yet see through. The live discovery walks through it: John 1:1-14 (the Word was with God and was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt, literally tabernacled, among us): clause after clause of Wisdom's autobiography comes true in Jesus Christ. Then John 6:35: he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst: Jesus takes Wisdom's banquet invitation and transcends it. Wisdom's food left you hungry for more; Christ's gift of himself satisfies forever, and the Eucharist is that banquet spread on the Church's table until he comes.

Handle the sealed guesses with celebration, not grading. Open them together mid-session (the flow below marks where). Common guesses: God's wisdom as an attribute, the Holy Spirit, the Torah, Mary, Jesus. Honor the partial truth in each: Wisdom is God's own wisdom; the tradition has long applied Sirach 24 liturgically to Our Lady (who bore Wisdom in her womb, the truest human tabernacle); the Torah really was Wisdom's address in Israel (24:23). But a central and widespread reading, from the Fathers on, is Christological, and state it with the right verb: Sirach's personified Wisdom, in the book's own literal sense a poetic figure for the created wisdom God communicated to Israel in Torah and worship, points beyond itself and is fulfilled in the Son: Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), the uncreated Wisdom who was with God before the ages, through whom all things were made, who tabernacled among us and feeds us with

himself. Teach fulfillment, not flat identity: the distinction protects both the text and the Creed. One precision to state carefully: when Sirach says Wisdom was created (24:9), Catholic interpreters, reading with Proverbs 8:22 (where the RSV2CE likewise says the Lord created Wisdom at the beginning of his work), take the language as the idiom of Wisdom poetry, not a denial of the Son's eternity: the Council of Nicaea settled against the Arians that the Son is begotten, not made, true God from true God. Personified Wisdom is a God-given sketch; the Incarnation is the portrait.

## OT Roots and Fulfillment

Sirach 24 is built on Proverbs 8:22-31, where the Lord created Wisdom at the beginning of his work and she was daily his delight, rejoicing before him as he made the world, and on Genesis 1 (the mist over the earth) and Exodus 25-40 (the tabernacle where the glory dwelt). Its river imagery (the Pishon, Tigris, Euphrates, and Gihon of Sirach 24) replants Eden's four rivers (Genesis 2:10-14) in Jerusalem: where Wisdom dwells, Eden begins again. The Wisdom-Christology stream flows into the New Testament: John 1, Colossians 1:15-17 (in him all things were created), Hebrews 1:1-3, and 1 Corinthians 1:24.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Athanasius

The great defender of Nicaea taught that the Wisdom through whom God made all things is not a creature but the eternal Son himself, the Father's own radiance and Word. When Scripture's Wisdom poetry uses the language of creation, Athanasius read it of the Son's incarnate mission and of Wisdom's imprint in creatures, never of the Son's origin, for there was never a moment when the Father was without his Wisdom.

*Discourses Against the Arians, Book II (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Ambrose of Milan

In his mystagogical instruction of the newly baptized, Ambrose read Wisdom's banquet (Wisdom has built her house, mixed her wine, set her table) of the sacraments of the altar, where Christ feeds his people with his own Body and Blood.

*On the Mysteries and On the Sacraments, mystagogical catecheses (paraphrased and synthesized)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thomas Aquinas

The Church sings Aquinas' words at Benediction to this day: O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received, the memory of his Passion is renewed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us. The antiphon holds the banquet's two truths together, grace received now and glory still pledged: which is why, on earth, those who eat him hunger for more, until desire and satisfaction meet in heaven.

*O Sacrum Convivium, with the study's application (paraphrased)*

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 240-241:** Jesus is the eternal Son and Word: the Church's faith confesses the Word who was in the beginning with God, through whom all things were made.
- **CCC 1324:** The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life.

- **CCC 1336:** This is a hard saying: the Eucharist has always been a stumbling block and a mystery of faith, dividing those who walk away from those who stay.

## Thread Watch

- **RESOLVE (Who is Wisdom?):** the sealed guesses open tonight at the marked point in the flow. Celebrate every guess, honor the partial truths, and land the Church's Christological reading with John 1 and 1 Corinthians 1:24.
- **DEVELOP (Fear of the Lord):** 24:19-22 and the whole banquet scene show what fear of the Lord was always for: not distance but appetite: reverence that draws near to eat.

## Session Goals

1. Trace Wisdom's autobiography in 24:1-17: from the mouth of the Most High, over all creation, tabernacled in Jacob, serving in Zion's liturgy.
2. Sit with the banquet invitation and its paradox: those who eat me will hunger for more (24:19-21).
3. Open the sealed guesses with joy and gather the candidates.
4. Discover John 1:1-14 fulfilling every clause, and John 6:35 transcending the banquet: the Bread of Life who satisfies forever.
5. Land the Eucharistic payoff: Wisdom's banquet is spread on the altar, and we are invited by name.

## Time Note

90 minutes and the fullest session of the study. Pre-chosen cuts: Build question 2 (the trees of 24:12-17) can shrink to reading the verses with one appreciation question; the rivers Dig Deeper goes home unread. Do not trim the guess-opening or the John discoveries.

## SESSION 8: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 8: Come to Me: Wisdom's Banquet

#### Opening Prayer

*Come, Wisdom of the Most High, who order all things mightily and sweetly: come and teach us the way of prudence. Lord Jesus, Word and Wisdom of the Father, open our eyes tonight as you opened the Scriptures to the disciples at Emmaus, and be known to us in the breaking of the bread. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** What is a meal you will remember for the rest of your life, and what made it unforgettable: the food, or something else?

**Win 2.** Tonight we finally open the guesses you sealed in Session 1. Before we do: without revealing your guess, how confident are you, on a scale of one to ten?

#### Build: Into the Text

**1.** Read Sirach 24:1-7, Wisdom's own account of her origin and range. Where does she say she came from (24:3)? What did she do in 24:3b-6 (covering the earth like a mist, dwelling in the heights, circling heaven, ruling the waves, holding sway over every people)? What kind of being could truthfully say these things?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

She came forth from the mouth of the Most High: she is God's own utterance, his Word and breath, poetically personified. Her range is total: earth, heaven, abyss, sea, all nations. Notice how the picture strains its own frame: what comes forth from God's mouth, covers the earth like a mist at the beginning (hear the mist of Genesis 2:6 rising to water the earth, and the Spirit over the waters of Genesis 1:2), and holds sway over every people is no ordinary creature among creatures; the poem is reaching for God's own going-forth into the world. In its literal sense this is personification, Israel's way of speaking about the wisdom God gives; but the portrait keeps outgrowing that frame. Keep the tension taut: do not resolve it yet.

**2.** Read 24:8-12. What does the Creator command Wisdom to do, and what word does verse 8 use for her dwelling? Where exactly does she settle, and what does she do in 24:10? Why would the God whose Wisdom fills the cosmos give her a street address?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Make your dwelling in Jacob: and the verb means to pitch a tent, to tabernacle. She is established in Zion, in the beloved city, and she ministered before him in the holy tabernacle: Wisdom becomes a liturgical minister in Israel's sanctuary. The scandal of particularity: the universal Wisdom of God chooses one people, one city, one tent, because God's way of reaching everyone is to dwell somewhere: the election of Israel is the delivery route of universal blessing (Genesis 12:3). File the tabernacle image carefully: it is tonight's hinge.

3. Read the banquet invitation, 24:19-22, aloud, slowly. Who is invited, what is on the menu, and what is the strange promise of verse 21: those who eat me will hunger for more, and those who drink me will thirst for more? How can food that satisfies also deepen hunger, and is that a defect?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Invited: you who desire me: appetite is the only admission ticket. The menu is Wisdom herself: her fruits, and then, nakedly, me. The paradox: the best things do not exhaust desire, they enlarge it: the more you know God, the more of him you want, and this is glory, not defect: an infinite good can only be enjoyed by an ever-expanding hunger. Every lesser appetite shrinks with feeding; this one grows. Hold the group here a moment: someone, two centuries later, will pick up this exact sentence and dare to outbid it.

**OPEN THE SEALED GUESSES**

4. The moment has come. Take out your Take-Home 1 sheets and, going around the circle, reveal your Session 1 guess: who or what is Wisdom in this book? Leader: chart the guesses, cheer the daring ones, and note what Ben Sira himself says in 24:23: all this is the book of the covenant... the law which Moses commanded us. Was Ben Sira wrong to identify Wisdom with the Torah?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Gather the guesses without grading: God's attribute of wisdom, the Torah, the Holy Spirit, Mary, Jesus: each holds real truth. Ben Sira's own answer (the Torah) was not wrong but penultimate: Wisdom really was encountered in the Law, Israel's covenant treasure: he identified the deepest place Wisdom had yet made her address. But his own chapter overflows the identification: the poem keeps saying more than a book can carry: this Wisdom comes forth from God's mouth, pitches a tent, ministers in the sanctuary, and says eat me. The personification strains toward a Person the author could not yet see. Now we go see it.

**LIVE DISCOVERY**

5. Turn to John 1:1-5 and 1:14. Read them aloud against Sirach 24. Clause by clause: where is came forth from the mouth of the Most High? Where is before the ages? Where is make your dwelling in Jacob, and what is the literal Greek of dwelt in John 1:14? Who is Wisdom?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God: the utterance from the mouth of the Most High, before the ages, and not a creature but God. All things were made through him: Wisdom's presence to all creation. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us: the Greek verb is *eskenosen*: he tabernacled, pitched his tent, among us: John reaches for the very image of Sirach 24:8. Here is the resolution, stated carefully because precision honors the text: in its own literal sense, Sirach 24 is a personification of the wisdom God created and communicated to Israel, above all in the Torah (Ben Sira says so himself, 24:23). But the whole Wisdom tradition was pointing beyond itself, and in the fullness of revelation it is fulfilled without remainder in Jesus Christ, the eternal and uncreated Wisdom and Word of the Father: Paul says it flatly: Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), and John's prologue speaks the Wisdom tradition's vocabulary. The sketch belongs to creation; the One it was sketching does not. Whoever guessed Jesus: stand and be applauded, and now you know precisely in what sense you were right. And honor the other guesses: Wisdom is God's own wisdom (yes, that is the literal sense); she was encountered in the Torah (yes, Ben Sira's own answer); and Mary is the truest human

tabernacle, who carried Wisdom made flesh beneath her heart, which is why the Church reads Sirach 24 on her feasts.

One precision, stated simply: Sirach 24:9 says Wisdom was created before the ages. The Church, at Nicaea, settled that the Son is begotten, not made: eternally from the Father, never non-existent. Wisdom poetry's created is the idiom of the sketch, not a datum about the Son's origin: the portrait corrects and completes the sketch, as portraits do.

## LIVE DISCOVERY

6. One more door. Wisdom said: those who eat me will hunger for more, and those who drink me will thirst for more (24:21). Find John 6:35 and read it. What does Jesus claim, how does it deliberately outbid Sirach 24:21, and where is this banquet served now? Read John 6:51-56 and answer as concretely as the text does.

### ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. Jesus takes Wisdom's banquet sentence and transcends it: her food enlarged hunger; his gift of himself satisfies it, finally and forever. And he refuses to keep it a metaphor: the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh... he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him (6:51, 56): language so concrete that disciples walked away (6:66), and he let them, asking the Twelve only, will you also go away? The banquet is served on the altar: the Eucharist, source and summit (CCC 1324), where Wisdom's eat me is fulfilled without remainder.

A resolution in the spirit of Aquinas' antiphon, worth giving the group: on earth the sacred banquet fills us with grace and enlarges our desire (we hunger for more, Sirach was right); in glory, desire and satisfaction will finally coincide (we shall never hunger, Jesus is right). Both verses are true; they are two mileposts on one road.

Close the discovery by connecting the whole study: the fear of the Lord that began our journey (Session 1) was never meant to keep us at a distance: it was appetite in training. Reverence brings us to the table.

## Dig Deeper

### DIG DEEPER: Eden's rivers replanted

Read the closing river verses of Sirach 24 at home: Wisdom overflows like the Pishon, Tigris, Euphrates, and Gihon: four of Eden's rivers (Genesis 2:10-14) now flowing from Jerusalem. Where Wisdom dwells, Eden begins again. John saw the finale: the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Revelation 22:1).

### DIG DEEPER: Why the Church reads Sirach 24 on Marian feasts

The liturgy has long placed Wisdom's speech on the feasts of Our Lady: not because Mary is the eternal Wisdom (she is a creature, the first and greatest of the redeemed), but because image after image lands on her secondarily and beautifully: the tabernacle in whom Wisdom dwelt, the garden where the shoot of Jesse grew, the mother who says of her Son, come, eat (John 2:5: do whatever he tells you). The Christological reading and the Marian reading are nested, not rivals.

## Send: Taking It Out

**Send 1.** Wisdom's only admission ticket is desire: come to me, you who desire me. Sunday after Sunday, the same invitation stands at the altar. What is the honest state of your appetite for the Eucharist right now, and what feeds or starves it?

**Send 2.** Your sealed guess is open. Knowing now who Wisdom is, what would it mean to seek wisdom this year: not a technique, but him?

## Live It This Week

- Attend one weekday Mass this week if you possibly can, and receive (or make a spiritual communion) with Sirach 24:19-21 prayed beforehand: Come to me, you who desire me.
- Spend fifteen minutes before the Blessed Sacrament (or in quiet if no chapel is near) simply repeating the memory verse and letting the hunger it names surface.
- Reread Sirach 24 once at home with John 1 open beside it, and mark every clause that now reads differently.

## Closing Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ, Wisdom of the Father, Word from his mouth, who pitched your tent among us and spread your banquet on the altar: we came to you desiring, and you gave us yourself. Enlarge our hunger on earth until you satisfy it in glory, where those who come to you will hunger no more (John 6:35). Who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

## Scripture Memory Verse

"Those who eat me will hunger for more, and those who drink me will thirst for more." (**Sirach 24:21**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 34:18-26 and 35:1-17.

## SESSION 8: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

### Session 8: Come to Me: Wisdom's Banquet

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 24:1-7
7. Sirach 24:8-12
8. Sirach 24:19-22
9. Sirach 24:23
10. John 1:1-5, 14
11. 1 Corinthians 1:24 (within discussion)
12. John 6:35
13. John 6:51-56, 66-68
14. Proverbs 8:22-31 (leader reference)
15. Genesis 2:10-14 and Revelation 22:1 (take-home reading)
16. CCC 240-241, 1324, 1336 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 24:21, "Those who eat me will hunger for more, and those who drink me will thirst for more."



# Take-Home for Session 8: Come to Me: Wisdom's Banquet

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- Wisdom's autobiography: she came forth from the mouth of the Most High, was present to all creation before the ages, and at God's command pitched her tent in Jacob and ministered in Zion's sanctuary (24:3-12).
- Her banquet: come to me, you who desire me, and the holy paradox: those who eat me will hunger for more (24:19-21): an infinite good enlarges the appetite it feeds.
- The guesses opened, and the Gospel answered: in the beginning was the Word... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1, 14), John's verb, *eskenosen*, meaning pitched his tent. In Sirach's poetic presentation, Wisdom is the created wisdom God gave Israel, at home above all in the Torah (24:9, 23), and this figure points beyond itself and is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the eternal and uncreated Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24): the sketch belongs to creation; the One it sketches is begotten, not made (Nicaea).
- Jesus outbids the banquet: I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger (John 6:35), and serves it concretely in his flesh and blood (John 6:51-56): the Eucharist is Wisdom's table, and reverence was always appetite in training.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Athanasius

The great defender of Nicaea taught that the Wisdom through whom God made all things is not a creature but the eternal Son himself, the Father's own radiance and Word. When Scripture's Wisdom poetry uses the language of creation, Athanasius read it of the Son's incarnate mission and of Wisdom's imprint in creatures, never of the Son's origin, for there was never a moment when the Father was without his Wisdom.

*Discourses Against the Arians, Book II (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Ambrose of Milan

In his mystagogical instruction of the newly baptized, Ambrose read Wisdom's banquet (Wisdom has built her house, mixed her wine, set her table) of the sacraments of the altar, where Christ feeds his people with his own Body and Blood.

*On the Mysteries and On the Sacraments, mystagogical catecheses (paraphrased and synthesized)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thomas Aquinas

The Church sings Aquinas' words at Benediction to this day: O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received, the memory of his Passion is renewed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us. The antiphon holds the banquet's two truths together, grace received now and glory still pledged: which is why, on earth, those who eat him hunger for more, until desire and satisfaction meet in heaven.

## **Live It This Week**

- Attend one weekday Mass this week if you possibly can, and receive (or make a spiritual communion) with Sirach 24:19-21 prayed beforehand: Come to me, you who desire me.
- Spend fifteen minutes before the Blessed Sacrament (or in quiet if no chapel is near) simply repeating the memory verse and letting the hunger it names surface.
- Reread Sirach 24 once at home with John 1 open beside it, and mark every clause that now reads differently.

## **Scripture Memory Verse**

"Those who eat me will hunger for more, and those who drink me will thirst for more." (**Sirach 24:21**)

## **Before Next Session**

Read Sirach 34:18-26 and 35:1-17.

## **Catechism References**

CCC 240-241; CCC 1324; CCC 1336

## SESSION 9: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 9: The Prayer of the Humble Pierces the Clouds

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**Passage:** Sirach 34:18-26; 35:1-17

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers what makes worship acceptable or abominable to God: sacrifice funded by injustice is rejected, keeping the commandments is itself an offering, and the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and connects it all to the Mass.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Adoration and acceptable worship (CCC 2096-2097); humility as the foundation of prayer (CCC 2559).

#### What You Need to Know

Tonight Ben Sira takes us to the Temple and asks the prophets' question: what makes worship real? Sirach 34:18-26 is deliberately shocking: if one sacrifices from what has been wrongfully obtained, the offering is blemished... Like one who kills a son before his father's eyes is the man who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor (34:18-20). The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood (34:21). Worship funded by injustice is not merely imperfect: it is abomination, and washing after touching a corpse only to touch it again (34:25-26) is his image for confession without conversion.

Then chapter 35 gives the positive teaching in three movements. First: he who keeps the law makes many offerings; he who heeds the commandments sacrifices a peace offering. He who returns a kindness offers fine flour, and he who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering (35:1-2): obedience and mercy are themselves liturgy: our almsgiving thread sounds its final echo. Second: do not appear before the Lord empty-handed, and with every gift show a cheerful face (35:4-9): worship still wants our real gifts, gladly given. Third, the summit: the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord (35:17): God cannot be bribed (35:12: he will not accept a bribe, and he shows no partiality) but he can always be reached from below: the lowly, the wronged, the widow's complaint have a direct line through the ceiling of the world.

The live discovery places Ben Sira in the prophets' choir (Isaiah 1, Psalm 51) and then finds Jesus teaching the identical doctrine at the altar itself: if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift... first be reconciled (Matthew 5:23-24), and the tax collector whose seven-word prayer went home justified (Luke 18:9-14). Land the Catholic payoff gently but clearly: this is why the Mass opens with a penitential act, why the sign of peace before Communion echoes the call to reconcile, and why the one sacrifice we plead is Christ's own: the only offering with no injustice in its funding. Our worship is acceptable in him, and it obligates us to the poor on the way out the door.

#### OT Roots and Fulfillment

Ben Sira stands in the great prophetic line on worship: what to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?... cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression (Isaiah 1:11-17); I desire mercy and not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6, quoted twice by Jesus); the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:16-17); and Micah 6:6-8. None of these texts abolish sacrifice: Psalm 51 ends with right sacrifices offered on a rebuilt Zion. They order it: justice and humility first, then the offering God delights in.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Damascene

The last of the Greek Fathers gave the Church her classic definition, enshrined in the Catechism: prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God, or the requesting of good things from God. Sirach's image gives the definition wings: what is raised in humility pierces the clouds.

*On the Orthodox Faith (as cited in CCC 2559, paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Cyprian of Carthage

Commenting on the Lord's Prayer, Cyprian taught that God hears not the voice but the heart, and does not need to be reminded by our shouting: the quiet, humble, disciplined prayer, he taught, is the one with entry to God's ears: God hears the heart, not the voice.

*On the Lord's Prayer, 4-6 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thérèse of Lisieux

The Little Flower described prayer as a surge of the heart, a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy: words the Catechism placed at the head of its whole section on prayer. Her little way is Sirach 35:17 lived: nothing pierces higher than what rises from the lowest place.

*Story of a Soul, manuscript C (as cited in CCC 2558, paraphrased)*

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 2559:** Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God (St. John Damascene); humility is the foundation of prayer.
- **CCC 2558:** Prayer is a surge of the heart, a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love (St. Thérèse).
- **CCC 2096-2097:** Adoration is the first act of the virtue of religion: to adore God is to acknowledge him as Creator and Savior with respect and absolute submission.

## Thread Watch

- **DEVELOP (Fear of the Lord):** 34:14-17 (just before tonight's text) blesses the soul that fears the Lord: his eyes are on those who love him. The fearer of the Lord is the one whose worship and wallet agree. One session remains before the thread resolves.
- **FINAL ECHO (Almsgiving and atonement):** 35:2, he who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering: mercy to the poor is not adjacent to worship; it is worship. The thread that began at 3:30 ends at the altar.

## Session Goals

1. Feel the full offense of 34:18-26: worship funded by injustice is abomination, and the poor's bread is their life.

2. See in 35:1-2 that obedience and almsgiving are themselves sacrificial worship: the almsgiving thread's final echo.
3. Establish from 35:12-17 that God takes no bribes and shows no partiality, yet the humble prayer always gets through.
4. Discover Jesus teaching the same doctrine at the altar (Matthew 5:23-24) and in the two men praying (Luke 18:9-14).
5. Connect it to the Mass: Confiteor, the peace, and the one unblemished offering we plead.

## **Time Note**

90 minutes. Pre-chosen cuts: Build question 2 (34:25-26 corpse-washing image) can fold into question 1; the second Dig Deeper goes home unread. Keep Luke 18 slow: it is the night's landing.

## SESSION 9: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 9: The Prayer of the Humble Pierces the Clouds

#### Opening Prayer

*Lord, you take no bribe and show no partiality, and yet the whisper of the lowly reaches your throne. As we study worship tonight, purify ours: reconcile us to our brothers, open our hands to your poor, and teach us the prayer that pierces the clouds. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** Describe a time you attended worship (Mass or otherwise) while your heart was somewhere else entirely. What was that like from the inside?

**Win 2.** If someone gave your parish a large donation earned dishonestly, should the parish take it? Why or why not?

#### Build: Into the Text

**1.** Read Sirach 34:18-22. What kinds of offering does Ben Sira call blemished and abominable, and what is the ferocious comparison in verse 20? Verse 21 says the bread of the needy is the life of the poor. How does that line turn an economic act into something much darker?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Offerings from what was wrongfully obtained, sacrifices funded by the property of the poor. The comparison: like one who kills a son before his father's eyes: God watches his poor being robbed to fund his own worship, and receives it as murder performed in his sight. Verse 21's logic: for the poor, bread is not a line item but life itself; to withhold it is to take life, which is why verse 22 calls the withholder of wages a man of blood. Deuteronomy 24:14-15 stands behind it: the defrauded worker's cry to God counts against you.

**2.** Read Sirach 35:1-5. Ben Sira lists actions that count as offerings without an animal in sight: keeping the law, heeding commandments, returning kindness, giving alms, forsaking unrighteousness. Is he replacing Temple worship with ethics? Read verses 4-9 (do not appear before the Lord empty-handed... with every gift show a cheerful face) before you answer.

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

Not replacing: ordering. Verses 4-9 still command real offerings, gladly and generously given: glorify the Lord generously, and do not stint the first fruits. His claim is that obedience and mercy are the substance that makes ritual real: the same lesson as Samuel (to obey is better than sacrifice, 1 Samuel 15:22) and Hosea (I desire mercy and not sacrifice, 6:6). Note the almsgiving thread's final chord: he who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering (35:2): what began at 3:30 as water on fire ends here as incense on the altar. Mercy to the poor is worship.

## LIVE DISCOVERY

3. Ben Sira is singing in a choir. Three readers: Isaiah 1:11-17, Psalm 51:16-17, then Psalm 51:18-19. What does each say God rejects, what does each say God wants, and what do Psalm 51's final verses prevent us from concluding?

### ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Isaiah: God is weary of sacrifices offered by hands full of blood: wash yourselves, seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. Psalm 51: you take no delight in sacrifice... a broken and contrite heart you will not despise. But 51:18-19 completes the thought: after restoration, then you will delight in right sacrifices. The tradition never abolishes sacrifice; it refuses to let ritual launder injustice. The order is: contrition and justice first, then the offering God delights in. That order is about to reappear on the lips of Jesus.

4. Read Sirach 35:12-15a: the Lord is the judge, and with him is no partiality. He will not show partiality in the case of a poor man; and he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged. God refuses bribes and refuses favoritism, yet the surrounding verses say he hears the wronged, the orphan, and the widow. Is that a contradiction? What kind of judge is being described?

### ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

No contradiction: it is what impartiality actually looks like in a tilted world. A bribable judge favors the rich by definition; a truly impartial one therefore hears the people who could never pay: the wronged, the orphan, the widow whose complaint pours down her cheeks. God's court is the one place on earth where having nothing is no disadvantage. The description indicts every human system where worship, access, or justice can be purchased, including subtle church versions of the same.

## LIVE DISCOVERY

5. Now the summit, and its fulfillment. Read Sirach 35:17 aloud: the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds. Then someone read Matthew 5:23-24, and someone read Luke 18:9-14. Where does Jesus teach Ben Sira's whole doctrine of worship, and what is it about the tax collector's prayer that got through the ceiling?

### ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Matthew 5: Jesus, at the altar, gives Ben Sira's order as a command: leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift: reconciliation precedes offering, or the offering waits. Luke 18: the Pharisee prays with himself, itemizing his assets; the tax collector stands far off and prays seven words: God, be merciful to me a sinner, and goes down to his house justified. What pierced the clouds was altitude: he prayed from the lowest place, with nothing to offer and no one to blame, exactly the humble prayer of 35:17. He who humbles himself will be exalted.

Land the Mass connection: this is why the Mass opens with a penitential act, often the Confiteor and Kyrie (we take the tax collector's position before we approach), and why, when the sign of peace is exchanged before Communion, it echoes Matthew 5:24, and why the sacrifice we plead is Christ's own: the one offering in history with no injustice anywhere in its funding. In him our worship is acceptable, and from him it sends us straight back out to the poor (35:2): the dismissal is part of the liturgy.

6. Read Sirach 35:18-20 to close (the Lord will not delay... till he repays the man according to his deeds... and does justice for his people). The humble pray and God vindicates, but on his clock. What does this promise do for the person praying from under injustice right now, and what does it forbid them?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

It promises that no humble prayer is filed away unread: the Judge has heard, the vindication is scheduled, and mercy will meet them as rain in drought. It forbids two things: despair (the clouds are pierced, even when the sky looks sealed) and revenge (the repaying is God's, Romans 12:19). Jesus attaches the same promise to the same posture: will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night?... he will vindicate them speedily (Luke 18:7-8), and then asks the only open question: when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth? Persevering, humble prayer is the faith he is looking for.

## Dig Deeper

**DIG DEEPER: The widow's tears**

Sirach 35:14-15 pictures the widow's complaint pouring down her cheek as her testimony against the one who caused the tears. Jesus builds a whole parable on her: the persistent widow before the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8), told so that we ought always to pray and not lose heart. The lowest voice in Israel's social order is Scripture's chosen icon of prevailing prayer.

**DIG DEEPER: The Offertory is not intermission**

Watch the Mass this Sunday at the presentation of the gifts: bread and wine are brought to the altar, and the collection for the Church and the poor is presented and set in its proper place near, not on, the altar (GIRM 73). The Church is enacting Sirach 35: real gifts, gladly given, taken up into the Church's liturgical offering, with the poor written in from her earliest days (CCC 1351). Do not appear before the Lord empty-handed was not discarded; it is fulfilled and transposed: Christians bring their gifts freely, joined to the one Gift.

## Send: Taking It Out

**Send 1.** Jesus' altar command is specific: if your brother has something against you, go first. Whose face appeared when you heard Matthew 5:23-24 tonight, and what will you do before next Sunday's Mass?

**Send 2.** Where might your worship be funded by injustice in ways you have not audited: how money is made, who is underpaid or overlooked so your life runs smoothly? What would an honest audit look like?

## Live It This Week

- Before Sunday, do the Matthew 5:24 errand where possible and prudent: the apology, the text, the conversation you have been deferring. (Making peace with a neighbor does not replace Confession: anyone conscious of grave sin should seek the sacrament before Communion, CCC 1385.)
- Pray the tax collector's prayer (God, be merciful to me a sinner) ten times slowly each day this week, from the lowest interior place you can find.
- Arrive at Mass five minutes early and pray the Confiteor in advance, meaning every word, so the liturgy's front door does its work on you.



## Closing Prayer

*God, be merciful to us, sinners. Take from our hands every gift funded by another's loss, reconcile us before we reach your altar, and teach us the humble prayer that pierces the clouds. Through Christ our Lord, the one unblemished offering, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.*

## Scripture Memory Verse

"The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord." (**Sirach 35:17**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 38:1-23. Bring an honest opinion: how do faith, doctors, and medicine fit together?

## SESSION 9: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

### Session 9: The Prayer of the Humble Pierces the Clouds

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 34:18-22
7. Sirach 35:1-5
8. Sirach 35:4-9
9. Isaiah 1:11-17
10. Psalm 51:16-19
11. Sirach 35:12-15
12. Sirach 35:17
13. Matthew 5:23-24
14. Luke 18:9-14
15. Sirach 35:18-20
16. Luke 18:1-8 (leader reference)
17. 1 Samuel 15:22 and Hosea 6:6 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 35:17, "The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord."

# Take-Home for Session 9: The Prayer of the Humble Pierces the Clouds

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- Worship funded by injustice is abomination: offering sacrifice from the property of the poor is like killing a son before his father's eyes, because the bread of the needy is their very life (34:18-22).
- Obedience and mercy are themselves liturgy: he who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering (35:1-2): our almsgiving thread ended at the altar, where it was always headed.
- God takes no bribes and shows no partiality, which is exactly why the wronged, the orphan, and the widow always have his ear: the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds (35:12-17).
- Jesus teaches the whole doctrine: be reconciled before you offer (Matthew 5:23-24), and the tax collector's seven words from the lowest place went home justified (Luke 18:9-14): the Mass forms these same dispositions in its penitential rite and exchange of peace, and Matthew's command may also require reconciliation before we ever arrive.

## Voices of the Church

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Damascene**

The last of the Greek Fathers gave the Church her classic definition, enshrined in the Catechism: prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God, or the requesting of good things from God. Sirach's image gives the definition wings: what is raised in humility pierces the clouds.

*On the Orthodox Faith (as cited in CCC 2559, paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Cyprian of Carthage**

Commenting on the Lord's Prayer, Cyprian taught that God hears not the voice but the heart, and does not need to be reminded by our shouting: the quiet, humble, disciplined prayer, he taught, is the one with entry to God's ears: God hears the heart, not the voice.

*On the Lord's Prayer, 4-6 (paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thérèse of Lisieux**

The Little Flower described prayer as a surge of the heart, a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy: words the Catechism placed at the head of its whole section on prayer. Her little way is Sirach 35:17 lived: nothing pierces higher than what rises from the lowest place.

*Story of a Soul, manuscript C (as cited in CCC 2558, paraphrased)*

## Live It This Week

- Before Sunday, do the Matthew 5:24 errand where possible and prudent: the apology, the text, the conversation you have been deferring. (Making peace with a neighbor does not replace Confession: anyone conscious of grave sin should seek the sacrament before Communion, CCC 1385.)
- Pray the tax collector's prayer (God, be merciful to me a sinner) ten times slowly each day this week, from the lowest interior place you can find.
- Arrive at Mass five minutes early and pray the Confiteor in advance, meaning every word, so the liturgy's front door does its work on you.

## Scripture Memory Verse

"The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord." (**Sirach 35:17**)

## Before Next Session

Read Sirach 38:1-23. Bring an honest opinion: how do faith, doctors, and medicine fit together?

## Catechism References

CCC 2559; CCC 2558; CCC 2096-2097

## SESSION 10: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 10: Honor the Physician

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**Passage:** Sirach 38:1-23, 24-34

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers Ben Sira's startlingly modern integration of faith and medicine, his wise and humane counsel on grief, and his praise of ordinary skilled work as what maintains the fabric of the world, and meets Jesus the carpenter and physician.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Christ the physician and the sacrament of the sick (CCC 1500-1510); the dignity and sanctification of human work (CCC 2427-2428).

#### What You Need to Know

Sirach 38 answers a question your group is quietly carrying: does trusting God mean distrusting doctors? Ben Sira's answer, unique in Scripture for its directness, is a resounding no: honor the physician with the honor due him, according to your need of him, for the Lord created him (38:1). The chain of gift runs: healing comes from the Most High (38:2), the Lord created medicines from the earth, and a sensible man will not despise them (38:4), the pharmacist compounds them, and by them the physician heals and takes away pain (38:7-8). The protocol of 38:9-12 holds it together: when sick, first pray, repent, and offer worship (38:9-11), AND give the physician his place, for the Lord created him; let him not leave you, for there is need of him (38:12): prayer and penicillin are not rivals; both descend from the same Father of gifts. There is even wry humor: he who sins before his Maker, may he fall into the care of a physician (38:15): a proverb with a wink.

Then 38:16-23, Ben Sira on grief, pastorally gold for young adults who have buried grandparents and sometimes friends: weep bitterly and wail... observe the mourning according to his merit (38:16-17): real grief is commanded, not embarrassed. And then the mercy of a limit: do not give your heart to sorrow; drive it away... do not forget, there is no coming back; you do him no good, and you injure yourself (38:20-21). Mourn truly, then let consolation come: the dead man is at rest (38:23), and your duty is to the living and to your own soul. The Christian completion the group will find: we grieve, but not as others do who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13): hope does not cancel tears (Jesus wept, John 11:35); it changes what the tears believe.

Finally 38:24-34, the craftsmen: the farmer, the seal-engraver, the smith, the potter, each absorbed in his work, keeping stable the fabric of the world (38:34). Ben Sira notes honestly that they will not sit in the assembly or expound proverbs (the scribe's leisure enables that, 38:24, 33), but he will not let anyone despise them: without them a city cannot be inhabited... they keep stable the fabric of the world, and their prayer is in the practice of their trade (38:32-34). The live discovery lands it: the eternal Wisdom we met in Session 8 spent most of his earthly life not teaching but building: is not this the carpenter? (Mark 6:3). The Incarnation dignified ordinary work for ever. Connect for your group: HVAC installs, nursing shifts, spreadsheets, diapers: done with skill and offered to God, these maintain the fabric of the world and are a prayer in the practice of the trade.

#### OT Roots and Fulfillment

Israel's earlier tradition was wary of medicine practiced as rival to God (King Asa is faulted for seeking physicians and not the Lord, 2 Chronicles 16:12: the and not is the sin). Ben Sira resolves the tension by locating

the physician inside God's providence: creation itself is medicinal (was not water made sweet with a tree? 38:5, remembering Exodus 15:23-25). On work, the roots run to Genesis 2:15 (man placed in the garden to till and keep it: work precedes the Fall) and to the Spirit-filled craftsman Bezalel, the first person in Scripture said to be filled with the Spirit of God, for the making of the tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-5).

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Basil the Great

Asked whether using medicine is consistent with piety, Basil answered that the medical art was given by God as a model of the healing of the soul, and that to reject its benefits out of pretended trust is obstinacy, while to place all hope in it and forget God is to dishonor the Giver of every remedy. Each herb was made for our aid, he taught, and gratitude refers every healing back to the Giver.

*The Long Rules, Question 55 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Paul II

In his letter on the meaning of suffering, John Paul taught that Christ did not explain suffering away but transformed it from within by his Passion, so that every sufferer can complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions (Colossians 1:24): not because the Cross lacks power, but because Christ leaves room for our share in his redeeming love. Suffering, joined to him, becomes fruitful.

*Salvifici Doloris, 19-26 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Josemaría Escrivá

The founder of Opus Dei preached that ordinary work, done with human competence and supernatural love, is the hinge of holiness for the laity: God waits for us every day in the laboratory, the operating theater, the workshop, the field. Sanctify your work, he urged: sanctify yourself in it, and sanctify others through it.

*Conversations, with the homily Passionately Loving the World (paraphrased and synthesized from his preaching)*

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1500-1505:** Illness and the mystery of suffering; Christ the physician, whose compassion toward the sick and healings are a resplendent sign of salvation.
- **CCC 1509-1510:** The Church continues Christ's healing mission: care for the sick, prayer, and the sacrament of Anointing.
- **CCC 2427-2428:** Human work proceeds from persons made in God's image; in work the person exercises and fulfills part of the potential inscribed in his nature.

## Thread Watch

- **DEVELOP (Fear of the Lord):** 38:9 sends the sick man first to prayer and cleansing of heart: the fearer of the Lord meets even illness coram Deo, before the face of God. One session remains before the thread resolves in the Temple.

## Session Goals

1. Trace the chain of gift in 38:1-8: God, earth, medicine, pharmacist, physician: one providence.
2. Learn the protocol of 38:9-15: pray first, repent, offer worship, and give the physician his place: both-and, not either-or.
3. Receive Ben Sira's grief counsel (38:16-23): mourn truly, then return to the living, and complete it with 1 Thessalonians 4:13.
4. Honor the craftsmen of 38:24-34 who maintain the fabric of the world, and meet the carpenter of Nazareth.
5. Send each person to sanctify one ordinary shift of work this week as prayer.

## Time Note

90 minutes, comfortable. Pre-chosen cuts: Build question 3 (38:15's wry proverb) folds into question 2; the Bezalel Dig Deeper goes home unread. Give the grief section room: someone in the group needs it.

## SESSION 10: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 10: Honor the Physician

#### Opening Prayer

*Father of gifts, from whom descends every good thing: the herb, the healer, the craftsman's skill, and the hope that outlives the grave. Teach us tonight to honor what you have made, to grieve as those who hope, and to work as those who pray. Through Christ our Lord, the carpenter and the physician. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** Doctors, dentists, therapists: which do you avoid longest, and what is your actual excuse?

**Win 2.** What is a piece of skilled work you have watched someone do (a trade, a craft, a save, a repair) that struck you as almost beautiful?

#### Build: Into the Text

**1.** Read Sirach 38:1-8. Map the chain: who created the physician (38:1)? Where does healing come from (38:2)? Where do medicines come from, and who is warned not to despise them (38:4)? What is God doing through the pharmacist and physician (38:6-8)? What does this chain do to the assumption that trusting God and trusting medicine compete?

##### **ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

The Lord created the physician; healing comes from the Most High; the Lord created medicines from the earth, and a sensible man will not despise them; God gave men skill that he might be glorified in his marvelous works, and by medicines the physician heals and takes away pain. The chain abolishes the competition: the doctor is not an alternative to God but an instrument of God, the way the farmer is God's instrument for daily bread. To despise medicine in the name of faith is to refuse a gift while praising the Giver. Verse 5 even grounds it in the Exodus: was not water made sweet with a tree? God has healed through created means since Marah.

**2.** Read the sick man's protocol, 38:9-12. Put the steps in order: what comes first (38:9-11), and what comes and stays (38:12: give the physician his place... let him not leave you)? Why does Ben Sira sequence it this way, and what do the two errors look like that this protocol prevents?

##### **ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

First: pray to the Lord, do not be negligent; then cleanse your heart from sin (illness is a summons to examine, not proof of guilt), offer your worship: and then, without contradiction, give the physician his place, for the Lord created him. Prayer first because God is the source and healing's deepest register is the soul; the physician retained because God ordinarily heals through means. The two errors prevented: the pious error (refusing medicine as if faith required it: King Asa inverted, 2 Chronicles 16:12's sin was seeking physicians and not the Lord, not seeking physicians at all) and the secular error (treating the body as a machine and never letting illness ask its spiritual question). Ben Sira's both-and is the Catholic instinct: grace works through nature: water in baptism, oil in anointing, medicine in healing.



3. Read Sirach 38:16-23, the grief passage, slowly. What does Ben Sira command in 38:16-17, and what does he command in 38:20-23? These sound opposite. How do they fit together, and what is humane about each? What is the one thing his era could not yet say, and where does the New Testament say it? (Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14.)

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Commanded first: my son, let your tears fall for the dead... weep bitterly and wail... observe the mourning according to his merit: grief is owed, real, embodied, and unembarrassed. Commanded second: do not give your heart to sorrow; drive it away, remembering the end... you do him no good, and you injure yourself... when the dead is at rest, let his remembrance cease (in the sense of releasing active grief, not forgetting love). The fit: mourn truly, then return to the living: grief is a road through, not an address. What Ben Sira could not yet say, Paul says: we grieve, but not as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Hope does not cancel the tears (Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb knowing what he was about to do, John 11:35): it changes what the tears believe.

Pastoral note: if grief in the group surfaces, slow down and let it. Also name plainly: grief that cannot lift for months, that steals sleep and function, deserves help: a priest, a counselor, a doctor (tonight's chapter has already told us the physician is God's gift). The chapter's logic extends to grief: receiving skilled help is receiving God's gift (38:12, by extension).

4. Read Sirach 38:24-30: the scribe's leisure, then the farmer absorbed in his furrows, the craftsman at his seal, the smith at the anvil, the potter at his wheel, each one careful to complete his work (38:27). Ben Sira says frankly these workers will not be sought out for counsel or sit in the assembly (38:32-33). Is he looking down on them? Read 38:31-34 before answering: what is his final verdict on skilled ordinary work?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

No: he is being honest about vocations while refusing the contempt that usually rides on that honesty. The verdict: without them a city cannot be inhabited... they keep stable the fabric of the world, and their prayer is in the practice of their trade (38:31-34). The scribe writes proverbs; the smith keeps the city alive: both are needed, and the workshop is a house of prayer. That last clause deserves a full stop: their prayer is in the practice of their trade: honest work done with excellence and offered to God becomes real prayer and a spiritual sacrifice acceptable through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5). The Second Vatican Council teaches exactly this: the ordinary work, prayers, and daily life of the laity become spiritual sacrifices, offered to the Father along with the Lord's Body in the Eucharist (Lumen Gentium 34). Not liturgy in the strict sacramental sense, but truly offerable, and offered.

## LIVE DISCOVERY

5. The Wisdom of God we unveiled in Session 8 had a trade. Someone find Mark 6:2-3 and read the townspeople's astonished question. What did the eternal Word spend roughly nine-tenths of his earthly years doing, and what does that fact do to Sirach 38's teaching on work? Then read Matthew 9:12-13: what does Jesus call himself, and how does tonight's whole chapter converge on him?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary? The Word through whom all things were made spent the long hidden years (Luke 3:23 puts him near thirty when his ministry begins) making the things a village needs, keeping stable the fabric of Nazareth with calloused hands, before the public ministry. The Incarnation dignified ordinary work for ever: if the workshop was good enough for eternal Wisdom, no honest trade is beneath a child of God, and none of it is wasted time in God's economy. And Matthew 9:12-13: those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick: Jesus reaches for Sirach 38's honored image to describe his own mission, physician of bodies (the healings) and of souls (I came not to call the righteous, but sinners, 9:13). Tonight's chapter converges on one person: the carpenter-physician, who worked, wept at a tomb, healed the sick, and turned suffering itself into the instrument of salvation.

For our group specifically: the sales call, the install, the nursing shift, the classroom, the spreadsheet, the diaper: done with skill and offered to him, these maintain the fabric of the world, and their prayer is in the practice of the trade.

6. Close with Sirach 38:34's phrase, their prayer is in the practice of their trade, next to St. Paul: whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:17), and whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men (3:23). What would it concretely look like for your actual Monday work to be prayer, and what would disqualify work from being offerable?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Concretely: begin the shift with an offering (a Morning Offering does this in thirty seconds); do the work with genuine competence (shoddy work is a shoddy offering: the craftsmen were careful to complete their work); treat the people in it as Christ (the customer, the patient, the difficult coworker); and refuse the shortcuts that would make the work dishonest, because (Session 9) an offering funded by injustice is blemished. What disqualifies work from being offered is not its lowliness (nothing was lowlier than a Nazareth workshop) but its dishonesty: fraud cannot be consecrated. Everything else, offered, ascends.

## Dig Deeper

### **DIG DEEPER: Bezalel, the first Spirit-filled man**

The first person Scripture describes as filled with the Spirit of God is not a prophet or priest but a craftsman: Bezalel, filled with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to make the tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-5). The Spirit's debut in a human resume is skilled manual work in God's service. Ben Sira's craftsmen, and every tradesman since, stand in his line.

### **DIG DEEPER: Anointing of the Sick is not last rites only**

The sacrament of Anointing (James 5:14-15: is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil) is for the seriously ill, the elderly in weakness, and those about to undergo a serious operation (CCC 1515): not only the dying. It can be received more than once. If illness touches your family, call the parish early, not only at the end (CCC 1514-1515).

## Send: Taking It Out

**Send 1.** Where have you been running either error: refusing help (medical, psychological, or otherwise) in the name of toughness or faith, or managing your body and mind as a machine while never letting illness or fatigue ask its spiritual question?

**Send 2.** Whose grief around you has passed the point where the casseroles stopped but the sorrow did not? What would Sirach 38's balanced mercy (real presence, gentle return to life) look like from you this month?

## Live It This Week

- Offer one full workday this week explicitly: Morning Offering at the start, competence as worship during, and a one-line prayer of presentation at the end: Lord, this shift is yours.
- If you have been postponing a medical, dental, or counseling appointment, book it this week: Sirach 38:12 is now your verse.
- Pray by name for one person who is sick and one person who is grieving, each day this week, and send one of them a message that proves someone remembers.

## Closing Prayer

*Lord Jesus, carpenter of Nazareth and physician of souls: bless the healers and the makers, teach us to grieve with hope, and receive our ordinary work as prayer. When we are sick, give us both faith and medicine with a grateful heart, and when we suffer, join it to your Cross and let none of it be wasted. Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.*

## Scripture Memory Verse

"My son, when you are sick do not be negligent, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you." (**Sirach 38:9**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 44:1-15. Then skim the famous names in chapters 44-49 and pick one ancestor whose story you half-remember.

## Session 10: Honor the Physician

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**Principal passages in order of use:**

6. Sirach 38:1-8
7. Sirach 38:9-12
8. Sirach 38:15
9. Sirach 38:16-23
10. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14
11. John 11:35 (within discussion)
12. Sirach 38:24-30
13. Sirach 38:31-34
14. Mark 6:2-3
15. Matthew 9:12
16. Colossians 3:17, 23
17. Exodus 31:1-5 (take-home reading)
18. 2 Chronicles 16:12 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 38:9, "My son, when you are sick do not be negligent, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you."

# Take-Home for Session 10: Honor the Physician

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- The chain of gift: God created the physician, healing comes from the Most High, medicines come from the earth, and a sensible man will not despise them (38:1-8): faith and medicine are not rivals but one providence.
- The protocol: when sick, pray first, examine your heart, offer worship, and give the physician his place, for the Lord created him (38:9-12): the pious error and the secular error both refuted in four verses.
- Grief: weep bitterly and mourn truly, then be consoled, for the dead is at rest (38:16-23); our place is with the living, completed by Paul: we grieve, but not as those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Jesus wept: hope changes what the tears believe.
- The craftsmen maintain the fabric of the world, and their prayer is in the practice of their trade (38:31-34): and Christ, whom the Church confesses as eternal Wisdom (Session 8), lived his long hidden years known in Nazareth simply as the carpenter (Mark 6:3) and took the physician's image for his mission (Matthew 9:12-13). Ordinary work, offered, ascends.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Basil the Great

Asked whether using medicine is consistent with piety, Basil answered that the medical art was given by God as a model of the healing of the soul, and that to reject its benefits out of pretended trust is obstinacy, while to place all hope in it and forget God is to dishonor the Giver of every remedy. Each herb was made for our aid, he taught, and gratitude refers every healing back to the Giver.

*The Long Rules, Question 55 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Paul II

In his letter on the meaning of suffering, John Paul taught that Christ did not explain suffering away but transformed it from within by his Passion, so that every sufferer can complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions (Colossians 1:24): not because the Cross lacks power, but because Christ leaves room for our share in his redeeming love. Suffering, joined to him, becomes fruitful.

*Salvifici Doloris, 19-26 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Josemaría Escrivá

The founder of Opus Dei preached that ordinary work, done with human competence and supernatural love, is the hinge of holiness for the laity: God waits for us every day in the laboratory, the operating theater, the workshop, the field. Sanctify your work, he urged: sanctify yourself in it, and sanctify others through it.

*Conversations, with the homily Passionately Loving the World (paraphrased and synthesized from his preaching)*

## **Live It This Week**

- Offer one full workday this week explicitly: Morning Offering at the start, competence as worship during, and a one-line prayer of presentation at the end: Lord, this shift is yours.
- If you have been postponing a medical, dental, or counseling appointment, book it this week: Sirach 38:12 is now your verse.
- Pray by name for one person who is sick and one person who is grieving, each day this week, and send one of them a message that proves someone remembers.

## **Scripture Memory Verse**

"My son, when you are sick do not be negligent, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you." (**Sirach 38:9**)

## **Before Next Session**

Read Sirach 44:1-15. Then skim the famous names in chapters 44-49 and pick one ancestor whose story you half-remember.

## **Catechism References**

CCC 1500-1505; CCC 1509-1510; CCC 2427-2428

## SESSION 11: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 11: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

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**Passage:** Sirach 44:1-15; highlights of 44:16-49:16

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers Ben Sira's great memorial roll of the faithful, finds its New Testament twin in Hebrews 11, and sees in both the seed of the communion of saints: the Church's family memory, in which the faithful dead are honored, remembered, and near.

**Catholic Touchstone:** The communion of saints (CCC 946-962, especially 956-957).

#### What You Need to Know

With chapter 44 Ben Sira's book changes key: from proverbs to praise, from counsel to roll call. Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers in their generations (44:1). For six chapters he walks Israel's story through its people: Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Phinehas, Joshua, Caleb, Samuel, Nathan, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Hezekiah, Isaiah, Josiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve Prophets, Zerubbabel, Joshua the high priest, Nehemiah, and back to Enoch, Joseph, Shem, Seth, and Adam (49:14-16). This is one of Scripture's longest sustained acts of remembering the faithful dead by name.

The prologue to the roll (44:1-15) is tonight's core text, and it contains a turn your group should discover rather than be told. Verses 1-9 are honest: some of the famous left names; but of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had not lived (44:9). The world forgets almost everyone. Then the turn at 44:10: But these were men of mercy, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten... their prosperity will remain with their descendants... their posterity will continue for ever, and their glory will not be blotted out (44:10-13). Why not? Because the remembering community is not the world but the covenant people, and behind them, God himself: their bodies were buried in peace, and their name lives to all generations. Peoples will declare their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise (44:14-15). That last verse evokes something concrete: an assembly speaking the ancestors' praise aloud: which resembles Israel's long practice of rehearsing the ancestors in worship, and which the Church does when her Eucharistic Prayers commemorate the saints and her litanies name them aloud.

The live discovery pairs Sirach 44 with its New Testament twin: Hebrews 11, the hall of faith (by faith Abel... Enoch... Noah... Abraham... Moses...), which concludes by calling the remembered dead a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us as we run (12:1). Both texts remember the dead by name in order to strengthen the living. From there, one honest step lands the Catholic doctrine: if the faithful dead are witnesses surrounding us, alive to God (he is not God of the dead, but of the living, Mark 12:26-27), then honoring them, learning from them, and asking their prayers is not a detour around Christ but the family life of his one body, of which death does not amputate members (CCC 946-962). Handle the intercession point with your standard honesty: the communion of saints is developed doctrine with real seeds here; the full flower (invocation of the saints) grows from these roots plus Revelation 5:8 and 8:3-4 (the prayers of the saints rising as incense) and the Church's early practice: pilgrims scratched requests for Peter and Paul's prayers at the third-century triclina beneath San Sebastiano on the Appian Way, and the practice runs on through the ancient liturgies.

## OT Roots and Fulfillment

Israel was commanded to remember: remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you (Deuteronomy 32:7). The Passover is institutionalized memory (this day shall be for you a memorial day, Exodus 12:14), the Psalms rehearse the ancestors constantly (Psalms 78, 105, 106), and the memory of the righteous is a blessing (Proverbs 10:7). Sirach 44-49 gathers that whole practice into one sustained act. The dark twin is also biblical: may his memory be cut off is the curse (Psalm 109:15): to be forgotten by the covenant community is Scripture's picture of judgment.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Bernard of Clairvaux

Preaching on All Saints, Bernard asked why we honor the saints, since they need nothing from us: our praise adds nothing to them. His answer: the memory of the saints stirs in us a longing to be with them and to be like them, so that honoring them is really a mercy shown to us: their remembered lives kindle ours.

*Sermon 2 for the Feast of All Saints (paraphrased, as read in the Liturgy of the Hours)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: The early Church at Smyrna

After St. Polycarp was martyred around AD 155, his church wrote an account explaining that they gathered his bones, more precious than jewels, and would celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom each year: worshiping Christ alone, they said, while loving the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord. It is the communion of saints in its infancy, within living memory of the apostolic age.

*The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 17-18 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Near death, Thérèse promised that her heaven would be spent doing good on earth, letting fall a shower of roses. The Church later canonized her, and devotion to her intercession spans the world: her promise is the communion of saints spoken in the first person.

*Her Last Conversations (paraphrased)*

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 946-948:** The communion of saints is the Church: a communion in holy things and among holy persons.
- **CCC 956-957:** The intercession of the saints, who do not cease to intercede for us, and our communion with them: we honor their memory and are strengthened by their fellowship.
- **CCC 961-962:** We believe in the communion of all the faithful: pilgrims on earth, the dead being purified, and the blessed in heaven, one Church.



## Thread Watch

- DEVELOP (Fear of the Lord): the roll's admission standard is not fame but fidelity: men of mercy whose righteousness has not been forgotten (44:10). The fearers of the Lord are the ones God remembers. Final resolution next week in the Temple.
- TEND (Why is this book in my Bible?): if anyone notes that Hebrews 11 reads like Sirach 44, smile: the observation is a deposit for next week's finale.

## Session Goals

1. Feel the honesty of 44:1-9: the world forgets almost everyone, including most of the great.
2. Discover the turn at 44:10-15: the men of mercy are remembered forever, because God and his congregation do the remembering.
3. Tour the roll (44:16-49:16) through three chosen ancestors and hear its rhetoric of praise.
4. Discover Hebrews 11-12:1 as the roll's twin and the faithful dead as a surrounding cloud of witnesses.
5. Land the communion of saints: one family, unbroken by death, honored, imitated, and interceding.

## Time Note

90 minutes. Pre-chosen cuts: in Build question 3, tour two ancestors instead of three; the Psalm 109 Dig Deeper goes home unread. Keep Hebrews 12:1 and the closing litany moment unhurried.

## SESSION 11: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 11: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

#### Opening Prayer

*God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God of the living: tonight we open your family album. Teach us to praise the famous and the forgotten faithful, to run our stretch of the race surrounded by their witness, and to live lives your congregation will one day be glad to remember. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** Who is an ancestor or elder in your family, by blood or by faith, whose story you find yourself retelling? Tell us one beat of it.

**Win 2.** Our culture is terrified of being forgotten (hence the posting, the branding, the legacy talk). Where do you feel that fear in your own generation?

#### Build: Into the Text

**1.** Read Sirach 44:1-9. List the kinds of famous men in verses 3-6 (rulers, counselors, prophets, leaders, composers, the wealthy living peacefully in their homes...). Now read verse 9 slowly: and some there are who have no memorial... they have perished as though they had not lived. What is Ben Sira admitting about fame and memory before he makes any promises?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

He is admitting the terror first: the world's memory is a sieve. Even among the genuinely great, some left a name and others vanished totally, as though they had never existed, and their children after them. No promise he is about to make can be trusted until he has looked oblivion in the face, and he does. This is the fear our whole culture medicates with visibility: Ben Sira names it in one verse and refuses to lie about it.

**2.** Now the turn. Read 44:10-15. Who are the but these of verse 10, what promises are made about their remembrance (44:10-13), and who exactly is doing the remembering in verses 14-15? Why does that answer the terror of verse 9?

##### **ANSWER** *(share after the discussion)*

But these were men of mercy (the Hebrew tradition's *chesed*: steadfast, merciful covenant love), whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten. Promised: their posterity continues, their glory will not be blotted out, their bodies were buried in peace, and their name lives to all generations. The rememberers: peoples will declare their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise: the covenant assembly, gathered liturgically, speaking their names: and behind the congregation, the God who does not forget (Isaiah 49:15-16: behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands). The terror of verse 9 is answered not by achieving more fame but by joining a family whose memory is kept by God and rehearsed by his people: mercy, not marble, is how a name survives.

3. Now tour the roll itself. Three readers: Sirach 45:1-5 (Moses), 47:2-11 (David), and 48:1-11 (Elijah, whose word burned like a torch). As each is read, listen for two things: what deed is praised, and what gift or covenant God attached to the man. What do you notice about how Ben Sira praises: is it flattery?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Moses: beloved of God and men, given the commandments face to face, glorified in the sight of kings. David: the giant slain, the singing established before the altar (David the liturgist gets as much space as David the warrior), and the covenant of kingship. Elijah: the prophet like fire, who raised the dead, was taken up in a whirlwind, and is expected again (48:10, which the group may recognize from the Gospels' questions about John the Baptist). It is not flattery: Ben Sira praises deeds done through God's gift, and he does not hide sins elsewhere in the roll (Solomon's folly is named bluntly in 47:19-20). The praise is doxology: each hero is a window, and the light praised is God's.

**LIVE DISCOVERY**

4. This roll has a twin. Turn to Hebrews 11 and read verses 1-2, then rapid-fire the names: one reader each for 11:4 (Abel), 11:5 (Enoch), 11:7 (Noah), 11:8 (Abraham), 11:24-26 (Moses). Then everyone together read Hebrews 12:1. What is the New Testament doing with the same technique, and what does 12:1 claim the remembered dead now are, relative to us?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Hebrews builds Sirach 44's memorial roll around one refrain, by faith, marching through several of the same figures for the same purpose: strengthening the living by rehearsing the faithful dead. Then 12:1 makes the claim Sirach could only reach toward: therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. The remembered dead are not filed away behind us: Hebrews sets their witness all around the runner, lives that testify and encourage. Add Jesus' own argument: God said I AM the God of Abraham... he is not God of the dead, but of the living (Mark 12:26-27): the men of mercy are alive to God right now, and the Church confesses them united with us in Christ.

Let someone say the observation aloud if they have not: Hebrews 11 strikingly resembles Sirach 44's memorial roll: whether by direct knowledge or shared tradition, the resonance is real. Bank it, with a smile, for next week.

5. If the faithful dead are living witnesses surrounding us, the Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints follows in three honest steps. Walk them: (1) death does not amputate members from Christ's body (Romans 8:38-39: neither death nor life can separate us from the love of God in Christ). (2) The saints in glory are not idle: read Revelation 5:8 and 8:3-4: what do the elders hold in 5:8, and what is the angel given, and what does he offer, in 8:3-4? (3) Therefore, what is the Church doing when she honors saints by name in the Eucharistic Prayer, keeps their feasts, and asks their prayers: and what is she NOT doing (CCC 956-957)?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

(1) If death cannot separate a member from Christ, it cannot separate the members from each other in him: the body has parts on both sides of the veil, one Church (CCC 962). (2) The elders hold golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints (5:8), and the angel is given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar (8:3-4): heaven is depicted receiving and presenting prayer

before God. On this vision and her unbroken tradition, the Church grounds the saints' own unceasing intercession (CCC 956). (3) So when the Church names Mary, the apostles, and the martyrs in the Eucharistic Prayer, keeps feasts, and asks the saints to pray for us, she is doing what Sirach 44:15 described (the congregation proclaims their praise) and what any Christian does in asking a friend to pray: the saints do not cease to intercede for us (CCC 956). She is NOT worshipping them: adoration belongs to God alone; the saints are honored as trophies of his grace, and every request ends where all their prayer ends, in Christ the one mediator, through whom their intercession works at all (1 Timothy 2:5 with CCC 956).

Honesty note, in our standard key: asking the saints' intercession is a developed practice: the seeds are here (living witnesses, prayers rising, the congregation's praise) and the flower is visible very early (the third-century trichia graffiti beneath San Sebastiano carry written requests for Peter and Paul's prayers). State the stronger objections too, honestly: many Protestants hold that the saints in Revelation are believers on earth, that Hebrews' witnesses testify by their past lives rather than observe us, that Scripture nowhere instructs the invocation of the departed, and, strongest of all, that Scripture forbids seeking communication with the dead (Deuteronomy 18:10-12). Answer the last head-on: necromancy summons the dead to extract hidden knowledge; asking the saints' intercession summons no one and seeks nothing hidden: it asks living members of Christ's Body (Mark 12:27) to do what all Christians do for one another, pray: and whatever the saints know of our requests, they know by God's gift in the vision of God, not by any power of their own. The Catholic answer rests on the communion of the one Body and the Church's early practice, not on these verses alone; next week's finale on how books and doctrines are handed down will complete this conversation.

6. End where Ben Sira aims the whole roll: at recruitment. Read Sirach 44:13-15 once more, and Hebrews 12:1-2 once more. The roll is open: names are still being added. Given how tonight defined a rememberable life (men of mercy, righteous deeds, covenant fidelity: not platform, wealth, or fame), what would have to change for your life to be the kind the congregation proclaims: and who is one witness in the cloud you will deliberately get to know this year?

#### **ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Open-ended by design: let the group answer personally. Press the definition once: every metric our culture uses for a memorable life (reach, income, novelty) appears in Sirach 44:1-8 among the categories that verse 9 says can still vanish without a trace; the only durable category is mercy and fidelity, because God is the archivist. And make the assignment concrete: choose one canonized witness (a patron, a saint whose story rhymes with your life) and spend the year in their company: read their life, ask their prayers, imitate one habit. The communion of saints is not a doctrine to hold but a family to live in.

Close the discussion by actually doing 44:15 for thirty seconds: leader names three or four saints (including the group's patrons), group responds pray for us: the congregation proclaiming their praise, live.

## **Dig Deeper**

### **DIG DEEPER: Elijah must come first?**

Sirach 48:10 says Elijah is ready at the appointed time... to turn the heart of the father to the son (with Malachi 4:5-6). Two centuries later the disciples ask Jesus why the scribes say Elijah must come first, and Jesus answers that Elijah has already come, in John the Baptist (Matthew 17:10-13). Sirach records the living expectation into which John was born: your Bible's books talk to each other.

### **DIG DEEPER: The curse of being blotted out**

The dark twin of tonight's promise: may his posterity be cut off, his memory blotted out (Psalm 109:13-15) is Scripture's curse, and Revelation reverses it into the great promise: I will not blot his name out of the book of life (Revelation 3:5). The remembered name, kept by God, is the Bible's picture of salvation itself.

## **Send: Taking It Out**

**Send 1.** Verse 9 named the fear (perishing as though we had not lived) and verse 10 named the cure (mercy and fidelity). Where in your life are you still investing in the verse 9 economy of being remembered, and what would moving that investment look like?

**Send 2.** Which witness in the cloud (a canonized saint or a faithful dead grandparent, mentor, or friend) has God used most in your life: and have you ever thanked God for them by name?

## **Live It This Week**

- Choose your witness for the year: one saint whose life you will read and whose intercession you will ask weekly. Write the name on your take-home sheet tonight.
- Do one act of family memory this week: call the oldest living member of your family and ask for one story about a faithful ancestor you never met. Write it down.
- Pray Hebrews 12:1-2 each morning before your feet hit the floor: surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses... looking to Jesus.

## **Closing Prayer**

*God of the living, we praise you for the famous and the forgotten faithful: the men and women of mercy whose names you keep. Surround us with their witness, teach us their fidelity, and number us, by your grace, among those the congregation will one day proclaim. Through Christ our Lord, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Amen.*

## **Scripture Memory Verse**

"Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers in their generations." (**Sirach 44:1**)

**Before next session:** Read Sirach 50:1-24 and 51:1-12. Last session next week: bring your Bible, your take-home sheets, and every question you have saved up about why this book is in your Bible.

## SESSION 11: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

### Session 11: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 44:1-9
7. Sirach 44:10-15
8. Sirach 45:1-5
9. Sirach 47:2-11
10. Sirach 48:1-11
11. Hebrews 11:1-2, 4-8, 24-26
12. Hebrews 12:1
13. Mark 12:26-27
14. Romans 8:38-39
15. Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4
16. 1 Timothy 2:5 (within discussion)
17. Sirach 47:19-20 (leader reference)
18. CCC 946-962 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 44:1, "Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers in their generations."

# Take-Home for Session 11: Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- Ben Sira faces oblivion honestly: even among the great, some have perished as though they had not lived (44:9): the world's memory is a sieve, and our culture's terror of being forgotten is ancient.
- The turn: but these were men of mercy, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten... their name lives to all generations, because the covenant assembly proclaims their praise (44:10, 14-15), and behind it stands the God who does not forget (Isaiah 49:15): mercy, not marble, is how a name survives.
- The roll's twin: Hebrews 11 rehearses the same names by faith, and Hebrews 12:1 promotes the remembered dead to a great cloud of witnesses surrounding the living; and Jesus adds that God is not God of the dead, but of the living (Mark 12:27).
- The communion of saints in three steps: death cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:38-39), and so cannot dissolve the communion of his one Body (CCC 955-959); heavenly worship presents the prayers of the saints before God (Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4), and the Church confesses the saints' unceasing intercession (CCC 956); so the Church honors, imitates, and asks the prayers of the saints, worshiping God alone, through the one mediator (CCC 956-957).

## Voices of the Church

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Bernard of Clairvaux**

Preaching on All Saints, Bernard asked why we honor the saints, since they need nothing from us: our praise adds nothing to them. His answer: the memory of the saints stirs in us a longing to be with them and to be like them, so that honoring them is really a mercy shown to us: their remembered lives kindle ours.

*Sermon 2 for the Feast of All Saints (paraphrased, as read in the Liturgy of the Hours)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: The early Church at Smyrna**

After St. Polycarp was martyred around AD 155, his church wrote an account explaining that they gathered his bones, more precious than jewels, and would celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom each year: worshiping Christ alone, they said, while loving the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord. It is the communion of saints in its infancy, within living memory of the apostolic age.

*The Martyrdom of Polycarp, 17-18 (paraphrased)*

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thérèse of Lisieux**

Near death, Thérèse promised that her heaven would be spent doing good on earth, letting fall a shower of roses. The Church later canonized her, and devotion to her intercession spans the world: her promise is the communion of saints spoken in the first person.

*Her Last Conversations (paraphrased)*

## **Live It This Week**

- Choose your witness for the year: one saint whose life you will read and whose intercession you will ask weekly. Write the name on your take-home sheet tonight.
- Do one act of family memory this week: call the oldest living member of your family and ask for one story about a faithful ancestor you never met. Write it down.
- Pray Hebrews 12:1-2 each morning before your feet hit the floor: surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses... looking to Jesus.

## **Scripture Memory Verse**

"Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers in their generations." (**Sirach 44:1**)

## **Before Next Session**

Read Sirach 50:1-24 and 51:1-12. Last session next week: bring your Bible, your take-home sheets, and every question you have saved up about why this book is in your Bible.

## **Catechism References**

CCC 946-948; CCC 956-957; CCC 961-962



## SESSION 12: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

### Session 12: Simon the High Priest and the Song of Thanksgiving

**Passage:** Sirach 50:1-24; 51:1-12, 23-30

#### Session Overview

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers Ben Sira's shining portrait of the liturgy at its summit, sees it fulfilled in Christ the true High Priest, resolves the fear-of-the-Lord thread in the book's own final verses, and settles, with full honesty, the question planted in Session 1: why is this book in my Bible?

**Catholic Touchstone:** Christ the one High Priest and the earthly liturgy as participation in the heavenly (CCC 1544-1545, 1090); the canon of Scripture (CCC 120).

#### What You Need to Know

Ben Sira ends his book the way his heart evidently worked: at the Temple, in the liturgy, at full volume. Sirach 50:1-21 is his vivid portrait, very likely an eyewitness memory, of Simon the high priest (Simon II, around 219-196 BC) emerging from the sanctuary: how glorious he was when the people gathered round him as he came out of the inner sanctuary! Like the morning star among the clouds, like the sun shining upon the temple of the Most High (50:5-7). The description cascades: the priests around him like cedars, the trumpets, the people falling to the ground as one, the singers, and Simon raising his hands over the whole congregation of the sons of Israel to pronounce the blessing of the Lord (50:20). It is the most detailed portrait of Second Temple worship in the Bible, very likely written from living memory by a man who never got over it.

The session's live discovery reads Simon as what he is: magnificent, and a silhouette. Hebrews supplies the portrait: the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing... but he holds his priesthood permanently... a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained... he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking his own blood (Hebrews 7:23-27 with 9:11-12), and we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens (4:14-16). Simon came out of an earthly sanctuary to bless Israel for a day; Christ, having entered the true sanctuary, comes forth in every Mass and will come forth at the end (Hebrews 9:28: he will appear a second time). Land the liturgical payoff: at Mass we are Ben Sira in the crowd: the earthly liturgy is a real participation in the heavenly one (CCC 1090), and the priest's raised hands over the congregation continue Simon's blessing under a greater Priest.

Then two resolutions. First, the fear-of-the-Lord thread: after the blessing, Ben Sira turns to the reader with his book's thesis restated (the fear of the Lord surpasses everything, and blessed is he who holds wisdom, in the closing chapters' idiom), and his autobiographical coda: while I was still young... I sought wisdom openly in my prayer... I found for myself much instruction (51:13-16), ending with the teacher's open door: draw near to me, you who are untaught, and lodge in my school (51:23), and the last line of the book: work at your tasks in due season, and in his own time God will give you your reward (51:30). The fear that began as wisdom's root (Session 1) has flowered into worship, thanksgiving (51:1-12 is a psalm: I will give thanks to you, O Lord and King), and a lifetime of glad labor: reverence became a song. Second, the canon steelman: the full and fair hearing promised in Session 1, laid out in the build questions below. Prepare it well; send them home with the whole answer.

## OT Roots and Fulfillment

Sirach 50 consciously echoes the great liturgical theophanies: Aaron's vestments and blessing (Exodus 28; Numbers 6:22-27: the raised-hands blessing Simon pronounces is Aaron's), Solomon's dedication when the glory filled the house and the people fell on their faces (2 Chronicles 5-7), and the bridegroom-sun imagery of Psalm 19:4-5. The high priest coming forth from the sanctuary is Israel's enacted picture of God coming forth to bless his people: which is why Zechariah's crowd waits breathless outside the sanctuary in Luke 1:21-22, and why the Church has long seen in the high priest's reappearance the very shape of the Second Coming that Hebrews 9:28 promises.

## Voices of the Church

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Ignatius of Antioch

Writing on his road to martyrdom around AD 107, Ignatius urged the churches: be careful to observe one Eucharist, for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup for union with his blood, one altar, as there is one bishop with the priests and deacons. The gathered, ordered, altar-centered worship Ben Sira loved continues, transfigured, in the Church's one Eucharist.

*Letter to the Philadelphians, 4 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Chrysostom

In his treatise on the priesthood, Chrysostom trembled at what Simon's successors under grace now handle: when you see the Lord sacrificed and lying on the altar, and the priest bending over the sacrifice and praying, do you still think you are among men and standing on earth? The priest at the altar, he taught, stands amid realities Simon's trumpets only foreshadowed.

*On the Priesthood, Book III, 4 (paraphrased)*

### VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Vianney

The patron of parish priests taught his village that the priesthood is the love of the Heart of Jesus: when you see a priest, he said, think of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the priest continues the work of redemption on earth, above all at the altar. The raised-hands blessing Israel knew from Aaron and Simon (Numbers 6:24-26 with Leviticus 9:22; Sirach 50:20) finds its fulfillment in Christ and echoes in the priest's blessing at every Mass.

*From his catechetical instructions, as given in the Office of Readings for his memorial, August 4 (paraphrased)*

## Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1544-1545, 1548:** Christ the one High Priest: the Old Covenant priesthood prefigured him, the one mediator (1544-1545); in the ministerial priesthood it is Christ himself who is present to his Church as Head (1548).
- **CCC 1090:** In the earthly liturgy we share in a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy celebrated in the holy city toward which we journey.
- **CCC 120:** The complete list of the sacred books: the Church receives 46 books of the Old Testament, including Sirach.

## Thread Watch

- RESOLVE (Fear of the Lord): planted at 1:14 as wisdom's beginning, developed through trial, freedom, and worship, the thread resolves in the book's own coda: reverence has become thanksgiving (51:1-12), glad discipleship (51:23-30), and a blessing received on our knees (50:20-21). Name the arc for the group explicitly.
- RESOLVE (Why is this book in my Bible?): the Session 1 promise comes due tonight. Run the steelman chain at full strength and full fairness.

## Session Goals

1. See the liturgy through Ben Sira's eyes: Simon coming forth in glory, the trumpets, the prostrate people, the raised-hands blessing (50:1-21).
2. Discover Christ the true High Priest through Hebrews 4, 7, and 9: Simon as silhouette, Jesus as portrait, the Mass as our place in the crowd.
3. Resolve the fear-of-the-Lord thread in the book's closing psalm and invitation (51:1-12, 23-30).
4. Run the canon steelman at full strength and answer it: history, councils, and the Church's authority to recognize her books.
5. Commission the group: Ben Sira's school is now theirs to keep open for others.

## Time Note

90 minutes and the study's densest finale. Pre-chosen cuts: Build question 1 can compress to reading 50:5-13 and 50:20-21 only; the Zechariah Dig Deeper goes home unread. The steelman chain needs its full 30 minutes: protect it above everything, and if necessary move the commissioning question into the closing prayer time.

## SESSION 12: DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Session 12: Simon the High Priest and the Song of Thanksgiving

#### Opening Prayer

*Father, we have walked twelve weeks in Ben Sira's school, and tonight he brings us where all wisdom was always heading: to the sanctuary, to the High Priest, to the blessing. Open our eyes to see your Son where Simon stood, settle our last question with truth, and send us out singing. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### Win: Opening Questions

**Win 1.** Twelve weeks in: what is one sentence from Sirach that has actually lodged in you and changed something?

**Win 2.** Describe the most overwhelming experience of worship you have ever had: a Mass, a liturgy, a moment. What made it overwhelming?

#### Build: Into the Text

**1.** Read Sirach 50:1-13, Ben Sira's vivid memory of Simon the high priest, and then 50:16-21: the trumpets, the shout, all the people together falling to the ground upon their faces to worship, the singers, and Simon raising his hands over the whole congregation to give the blessing of the Lord. Gather the images of 50:5-10 (morning star, sun, rainbow, roses, lilies, a young cedar, fire and incense, an olive tree). What is Ben Sira claiming about the liturgy by describing one man with the whole created order?

##### **ANSWER** (share after the discussion)

He is claiming that in the liturgy, creation reaches its point: star, sun, rainbow, garden, forest, and fire are gathered up in the figure who stands between God and the people. Simon coming out of the inner sanctuary is Israel's enacted picture of God coming forth to bless, wearing, in his vestments, the cosmos itself (the tradition read the high priest's garments as a map of creation). And note the people's posture: they fall on their faces, twice (50:17, 21): the fear of the Lord we met in Session 1, full grown, on its knees, receiving a blessing: the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:24-26, the Lord bless you and keep you, pronounced with raised hands as Aaron did at the first blessing (Leviticus 9:22), and heard at the end of Mass to this day.

#### LIVE DISCOVERY

**2.** Simon is magnificent, and Ben Sira knew his limits: Simon repaired a temple that would be desecrated within decades, and he died like every high priest before him. Three readers: Hebrews 7:23-27, Hebrews 9:11-12 with 9:24-28, and Hebrews 4:14-16. Point by point: where Simon was many, mortal, and repeating, what is Christ? What sanctuary did he enter, carrying what? And what does Hebrews 9:28 say he will do that every eye in Simon's crowd was, without knowing it, rehearsing for?

##### **ANSWER** (share after the discussion)

The former priests were many in number, because death prevented them from continuing; he holds his priesthood permanently. They offered repeatedly, first for their own sins; he is holy, blameless, unstained,

and offered himself once for all. They entered a sanctuary made with hands, carrying the blood of goats and calves; he entered heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf, taking his own blood, securing an eternal redemption. And 9:28: Christ, having been offered once, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him: the congregation craning toward the sanctuary door, waiting for the high priest to come out and bless them, is a living picture the Church has long read as her own posture, awaiting the Second Coming. Simon was the silhouette; Jesus is the portrait.

Land the Mass: this is not nostalgia for a lost Temple. In every Eucharist the true High Priest comes forth: the earthly liturgy is a participation in the heavenly one (CCC 1090), the priest's final raised-hands blessing recalls Simon's and stands under a greater Priest (CCC 1548), and we, like Ben Sira, are in the crowd. He never got over it; neither should we.

**3.** Read Sirach 51:1-12, the closing psalm (I will give thanks to you, O Lord and King... you have been my helper and delivered me), and then the book's last word, 51:23-30: draw near to me, you who are untaught, and lodge in my school... work at your tasks in due season, and in his own time God will give you your reward. Trace our study's oldest thread to its end: what has the fear of the Lord, planted in 1:14, become by the book's final page?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

It has become a song and a school. The reverence that began as wisdom's root (1:14) passed through the furnace (Session 2), learned mercy, speech, friendship, freedom, and worship, knelt under Simon's blessing (50:21), and now sings thanksgiving for rescue (51:1-12) and holds the classroom door open for the next generation (51:23). Fear of the Lord was never dread; it was appetite in training (Session 8) and apprenticeship in love: it ends not in trembling but in gratitude and glad work: work at your tasks... God will give you your reward. Say it plainly: this is the arc the study has been walking the whole time, and it is now theirs.

## STEELMAN

**4.** Session 1's promissory note comes due. The question: why is Sirach in your Bible and not in your Protestant roommate's? First, the case AGAINST at full strength, and make it honestly: it has four real pillars. (1) St. Jerome himself, the greatest biblical scholar of the ancient Church, distinguished these books as read for edification but not for establishing doctrine, following the Hebrew canon. (2) The Jewish community that produced Sirach ultimately did not receive it into the Hebrew Bible. (3) Sirach's own grandson, in the Prologue we read in Session 1, refers to the Law, the Prophets, and the other books as an existing collection, arguably implying a canon already recognized, into which his grandfather's book would be a latecomer. (4) Some fathers, notably in the East, echoed the shorter list. Conclusion: the sixteenth-century Reformers were not innovating but restoring the older, narrower canon. State it, feel its weight, and name what is genuinely strong in it.

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

What is genuinely strong: Jerome's hesitation is real and documented; the rabbinic canon really did settle without the deuterocanon; the Prologue really does name a threefold collection; and canon lists in the early centuries really do vary at the edges. A Catholic who pretends otherwise will be embarrassed by any informed interlocutor, and deserves to be. Let the objection stand at full height before answering: our people will meet it from serious Christians, and the answer must beat it at full strength or it has beaten

nothing.

## STEELMAN, PART TWO: THE ANSWER

5. Now the Catholic case, in five steps, each checkable. (1) Whose Old Testament did the apostles carry? (2) What did the early Church actually do with Sirach: one reader take James 1:19 next to Sirach 5:11, and recall Hebrews 11 beside Sirach 44. (3) What did the councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) list, and what did Florence (1442) and Trent (1546) do with that list? (4) What is the book's old Latin name, and why? (5) The decisive question underneath all canons: what kind of authority can settle a table of contents? Walk the steps and give the verdict.

### ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

(1) The Greek Scriptures were the principal Old Testament of the early Greek-speaking Church: the majority of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament follow Greek wording, and the deuterocanonical books were received, read, and handed on within that Greek scriptural tradition. Be precise here, because an informed friend will be: there was no single bound Septuagint with a fixed table of contents in the apostles' pockets (the great codices that carry the deuterocanon are fourth-century Christian productions, which itself testifies to the Church's usage), and New Testament authors sometimes follow Hebrew readings too. The honest claim is about the stream, not a book: the first Christians received their Scriptures within a living Greek tradition in which Sirach and its companions were already at home. (2) The early Church used Sirach in teaching and worship from very early: James' be quick to hear, slow to speak breathes Sirach 5:11; Hebrews 11's roll call walks Sirach 44's path; the Didache and the earliest fathers quote and echo Ben Sira; and the Church used him so heavily in her teaching that the book carried the nickname Ecclesiasticus, the church book: the traditional explanation of its old Latin title. Books do not acquire that nickname from the margins. (And honesty: a few early authors and lists placed these books in a second rank, which is exactly why the councils' settling of the question matters.) (3) Among the earliest surviving conciliar lists of the Church's canon, at the regional councils of Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397, with St. Augustine present and confirmation sought from Rome, Sirach was in the list. Regional councils do not define dogma by themselves; their weight is as witnesses to what the Church, in communion with Rome, had received and was settling into: and what they witnessed held: the same 46-book Old Testament reaffirmed at the Council of Florence in 1442, a lifetime before Luther, and defined solemnly at Trent in 1546. Trent did not add books in reaction; it defined what Hippo had witnessed eleven centuries earlier. Jerome, for his part, is more complicated than either side's poster: he voiced real reservations about books absent from the Hebrew canon, and he nevertheless lived and worked within the Church's use of them: he translated Tobit and Judith at the bishops' request (grumbling about it, by his own account), the other deuterocanonical books entered his Latin Bible in the older Latin versions, and he went on quoting them. His hesitation is real; so is the fact that the Bible bearing his name carried the full Catholic collection to the whole Latin world. (4) And the honest note on the other side: the rabbinic canon settled over the generations in which church and synagogue were going their separate ways: a settlement that never bound the Church, which had received her Scriptures from the apostles, not from later rabbinic deliberation. Notably, the rabbis themselves went on quoting Ben Sira for centuries: the book they excluded, they could not stop citing. (5) The decisive question: a table of contents cannot certify itself: no book of the Bible contains an inspired index. Knowing WHICH books are inspired requires an authority outside the books, and Christians of every stripe already trust that authority implicitly for the New Testament's 27 (a list first given exactly, as a complete set, in Athanasius' Easter letter of 367 and listed by the same Hippo and Carthage that listed Sirach). Hear the strongest reply before the verdict: a thoughtful Protestant will say the councils merely corroborated a canon already recognized through providential



reception, binding for neither testament. Press one question into that reply: received and recognized by whom? A reception that discerns true books from false just is the believing community exercising Spirit-guided judgment: name the mechanism and you have named the Church. The verdict, stated with a smile: the same Spirit-guided discernment that assures your roommate of the Gospel of John assures you of Sirach; to trust it for one testament and overrule it for the other is to saw off the branch one is sitting on. The Bible is the Church's book in this precise sense: God inspired the sacred human authors; Israel and the apostolic Church received, preserved, and handed on their writings; and the Church, guided by the Spirit, discerned which books belong: and she has read Ben Sira to her children since the early centuries.

Pastoral coda: say it without triumphalism. Our Protestant brothers and sisters love the Scriptures, and the 66 books they hold are all true Scripture: the dispute is over seven ancient books, plus portions of Esther and Daniel, that they are missing, not over anything false they have added. The right posture is an open Bible and an open door: exactly Ben Sira's, 51:23.

6. The commissioning. Ben Sira's last act is an invitation: draw near to me, you who are untaught, and lodge in my school (51:23). Twelve weeks ago you were the untaught drawing near; the seat at the front is now partly yours. Looking back over the whole study: which session's discovery would you most want to hand to someone who was not here, who is that someone, and what, concretely, is your first step: this month, not this year?

**ANSWER** (*share after the discussion*)

Open-ended and personal: let every member answer, and write the names down where the group can pray for them. Leader's charge to close: the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom (1:14) has walked us to a banquet (24), through a furnace (2), to an altar (35, 50), and into a family memory (44): and the last verse of the book is a work order with a promise: work at your tasks in due season, and in his own time God will give you your reward (51:30). The school stays open only if the students teach.

## Dig Deeper

### **DIG DEEPER: Zechariah at the sanctuary door**

Luke opens his Gospel inside Sirach 50's world: the priest Zechariah enters the sanctuary to offer incense while the whole multitude of the people were praying outside (Luke 1:8-10, 21-22), and comes out unable to speak, having met an angel beside the altar. The last scene of the old covenant's liturgy and the first scene of the new: the crowd outside the sanctuary, waiting for the priest to come out and bless them, and the blessing, this time, is a child on the way.

### **DIG DEEPER: Read the councils yourself**

The receipts are public: canon 36 of Hippo (393) and canon 47 of Carthage (397) list the Old Testament including Sirach, Wisdom, Tobit, Judith, and the Maccabees; the Council of Florence's Decree for the Jacobites (1442) repeats the list; Trent's fourth session (April 1546) defines it. Athanasius' 39th Festal Letter (367) gives the first exact 27-book New Testament. An afternoon with these texts will do more for your confidence than a year of internet debates.

## Send: Taking It Out

**Send 1.** You have knelt in Simon's crowd every Sunday of your life without knowing it. What will be different about the next Mass you attend: specifically at the Eucharistic Prayer and the final blessing?

**Send 2.** The canon question is now yours to answer for others, gently and with receipts. Who in your life is most likely to ask it, and what is the one step of the answer you most need to have ready?

## Live It This Week

- At Mass this week, watch for Sirach 50: the priest coming forth, the congregation's posture, the raised-hands blessing; and receive the blessing the way 50:21 describes: deliberately, on the inside if not on your knees.
- Pray Sirach 51:1-12 once this week as your own thanksgiving psalm, inserting your own rescues by name where Ben Sira names his.
- Answer the commissioning concretely: invite the person you named to whatever you do next: this study handed on, a Bible study, or simply Mass and brunch. Lodge in my school is now your line.

## Closing Prayer

*Father, we bless you, the God of all, who everywhere works great wonders, who has led us through this school of wisdom to the feet of your Son, our great High Priest. He has passed through the heavens; he comes forth to bless us at every altar; he will appear a second time to save those who eagerly wait for him. Keep us in reverence, in gratitude, and in glad work at our tasks, until in your own time you give the reward. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## Scripture Memory Verse

"I will give thanks to you, O Lord and King, and will praise you as God my Savior. I give thanks to your name."  
(Sirach 51:1)

**Before next session:** The study is complete. Keep the take-home sheets together: they are now a small handbook of everything we found. And keep the school open: draw near to me, you who are untaught (51:23).



## SESSION 12: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

### Session 12: Simon the High Priest and the Song of Thanksgiving

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#### Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 50:1-13
7. Sirach 50:16-21
8. Numbers 6:24-26 (within discussion)
9. Hebrews 7:23-27
10. Hebrews 9:11-12, 24-28
11. Hebrews 4:14-16
12. Sirach 51:1-12
13. Sirach 51:23-30
14. James 1:19 with Sirach 5:11 (steelman)
15. Luke 1:8-10, 21-22 (take-home reading)
16. CCC 120, 1090, 1544-1545 (leader reference)

**Memory verse:** Sirach 51:1, "I will give thanks to you, O Lord and King, and will praise you as God my Savior. I give thanks to your name."

# Take-Home for Session 12: Simon the High Priest and the Song of Thanksgiving

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*If You Come Forward to Serve: An Inductive Study of Sirach*

## What We Found

- Ben Sira's Temple liturgy: Simon the high priest coming forth from the sanctuary like the morning star and the sun, the trumpets, the people on their faces, and the raised-hands blessing of the Lord (50:1-21): creation itself gathered to its point in worship.
- Simon was the silhouette; Christ is the portrait: the High Priest who is one, sinless, and permanent, who entered heaven itself with his own blood once for all, and who will appear a second time to those eagerly waiting (Hebrews 4, 7, 9): at every Mass we stand in Ben Sira's crowd (CCC 1090, 1544-1545).
- The fear of the Lord, planted as wisdom's beginning in 1:14 and root in 1:20, resolves as a song of thanksgiving (51:1-12) and an open school door (51:23): reverence became gratitude, and the commissioning is ours.
- The canon question, answered with receipts: the Greek scriptural tradition of the early Church in which the deuterocanon was received and handed on, the early Church's wide use (the resonances of James 1:19 with Sirach 5:11 and Hebrews 11 with Sirach 44, and the nickname Ecclesiasticus), the witness of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) in communion with Rome, reaffirmed at Florence and defined at Trent, and the decisive point: the same Spirit-guided Church discernment that certifies the New Testament's 27 books certifies the Old Testament's 46. God inspired the authors; the Church received, preserved, and discerned: and she has read Ben Sira to her children since the early centuries.

## Voices of the Church

### **VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Ignatius of Antioch**

Writing on his road to martyrdom around AD 107, Ignatius urged the churches: be careful to observe one Eucharist, for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup for union with his blood, one altar, as there is one bishop with the priests and deacons. The gathered, ordered, altar-centered worship Ben Sira loved continues, transfigured, in the Church's one Eucharist.

*Letter to the Philadelphians, 4 (paraphrased)*

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In his treatise on the priesthood, Chrysostom trembled at what Simon's successors under grace now handle: when you see the Lord sacrificed and lying on the altar, and the priest bending over the sacrifice and praying, do you still think you are among men and standing on earth? The priest at the altar, he taught, stands amid realities Simon's trumpets only foreshadowed.

*On the Priesthood, Book III, 4 (paraphrased)*

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The patron of parish priests taught his village that the priesthood is the love of the Heart of Jesus: when

you see a priest, he said, think of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the priest continues the work of redemption on earth, above all at the altar. The raised-hands blessing Israel knew from Aaron and Simon (Numbers 6:24-26 with Leviticus 9:22; Sirach 50:20) finds its fulfillment in Christ and echoes in the priest's blessing at every Mass.

*From his catechetical instructions, as given in the Office of Readings for his memorial, August 4 (paraphrased)*

## Live It This Week

- At Mass this week, watch for Sirach 50: the priest coming forth, the congregation's posture, the raised-hands blessing: and receive the blessing the way 50:21 describes: deliberately, on the inside if not on your knees.
- Pray Sirach 51:1-12 once this week as your own thanksgiving psalm, inserting your own rescues by name where Ben Sira names his.
- Answer the commissioning concretely: invite the person you named to whatever you do next: this study handed on, a Bible study, or simply Mass and brunch. Lodge in my school is now your line.

## Scripture Memory Verse

"I will give thanks to you, O Lord and King, and will praise you as God my Savior. I give thanks to your name."  
(Sirach 51:1)

## Before Next Session

The study is complete. Keep the take-home sheets together: they are now a small handbook of everything we found. And keep the school open: draw near to me, you who are untaught (51:23).

## Catechism References

CCC 1544-1545, 1548; CCC 1090; CCC 120