

SESSION 3: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

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

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

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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."