

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

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."