

Session 5: A Faithful Friend Is a Sturdy Shelter

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

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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

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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."