

SESSION 6: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session 6: Stretch Out Your Hand to the Poor

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

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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."