

SESSION 7: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

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

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

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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."