

Session 9: The Prayer of the Humble Pierces the Clouds

Passage: Sirach 34:18-26; 35:1-17

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers what makes worship acceptable or abominable to God: sacrifice funded by injustice is rejected, keeping the commandments is itself an offering, and the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and connects it all to the Mass.

Catholic Touchstone: Adoration and acceptable worship (CCC 2096-2097); humility as the foundation of prayer (CCC 2559).

What You Need to Know

Tonight Ben Sira takes us to the Temple and asks the prophets' question: what makes worship real? Sirach 34:18-26 is deliberately shocking: if one sacrifices from what has been wrongfully obtained, the offering is blemished... Like one who kills a son before his father's eyes is the man who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor (34:18-20). The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood (34:21). Worship funded by injustice is not merely imperfect: it is abomination, and washing after touching a corpse only to touch it again (34:25-26) is his image for confession without conversion.

Then chapter 35 gives the positive teaching in three movements. First: he who keeps the law makes many offerings; he who heeds the commandments sacrifices a peace offering. He who returns a kindness offers fine flour, and he who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering (35:1-2): obedience and mercy are themselves liturgy: our almsgiving thread sounds its final echo. Second: do not appear before the Lord empty-handed, and with every gift show a cheerful face (35:4-9): worship still wants our real gifts, gladly given. Third, the summit: the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord (35:17): God cannot be bribed (35:12: he will not accept a bribe, and he shows no partiality) but he can always be reached from below: the lowly, the wronged, the widow's complaint have a direct line through the ceiling of the world.

The live discovery places Ben Sira in the prophets' choir (Isaiah 1, Psalm 51) and then finds Jesus teaching the identical doctrine at the altar itself: if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift... first be reconciled (Matthew 5:23-24), and the tax collector whose seven-word prayer went home justified (Luke 18:9-14). Land the Catholic payoff gently but clearly: this is why the Mass opens with a penitential act, why the sign of peace before Communion echoes the call to reconcile, and why the one sacrifice we plead is Christ's own: the only offering with no injustice in its funding. Our worship is acceptable in him, and it obligates us to the poor on the way out the door.

OT Roots and Fulfillment

Ben Sira stands in the great prophetic line on worship: what to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?... cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression (Isaiah 1:11-17); I desire mercy and not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6, quoted twice by Jesus); the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:16-17); and Micah 6:6-8. None of these texts abolish sacrifice: Psalm 51 ends with right sacrifices offered on a rebuilt Zion. They order it: justice and humility first, then the offering God delights in.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Damascene

The last of the Greek Fathers gave the Church her classic definition, enshrined in the Catechism: prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God, or the requesting of good things from God. Sirach's image gives the definition wings: what is raised in humility pierces the clouds.

On the Orthodox Faith (as cited in CCC 2559, paraphrased)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Cyprian of Carthage

Commenting on the Lord's Prayer, Cyprian taught that God hears not the voice but the heart, and does not need to be reminded by our shouting: the quiet, humble, disciplined prayer, he taught, is the one with entry to God's ears: God hears the heart, not the voice.

On the Lord's Prayer, 4-6 (paraphrased)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Thérèse of Lisieux

The Little Flower described prayer as a surge of the heart, a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy: words the Catechism placed at the head of its whole section on prayer. Her little way is Sirach 35:17 lived: nothing pierces higher than what rises from the lowest place.

Story of a Soul, manuscript C (as cited in CCC 2558, paraphrased)

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 2559:** Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God (St. John Damascene); humility is the foundation of prayer.
- **CCC 2558:** Prayer is a surge of the heart, a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love (St. Thérèse).
- **CCC 2096-2097:** Adoration is the first act of the virtue of religion: to adore God is to acknowledge him as Creator and Savior with respect and absolute submission.

Thread Watch

- **DEVELOP (Fear of the Lord):** 34:14-17 (just before tonight's text) blesses the soul that fears the Lord: his eyes are on those who love him. The fearer of the Lord is the one whose worship and wallet agree. One session remains before the thread resolves.
- **FINAL ECHO (Almsgiving and atonement):** 35:2, he who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering: mercy to the poor is not adjacent to worship; it is worship. The thread that began at 3:30 ends at the altar.

Session Goals

1. Feel the full offense of 34:18-26: worship funded by injustice is abomination, and the poor's bread is their life.

2. See in 35:1-2 that obedience and almsgiving are themselves sacrificial worship: the almsgiving thread's final echo.
3. Establish from 35:12-17 that God takes no bribes and shows no partiality, yet the humble prayer always gets through.
4. Discover Jesus teaching the same doctrine at the altar (Matthew 5:23-24) and in the two men praying (Luke 18:9-14).
5. Connect it to the Mass: Confiteor, the peace, and the one unblemished offering we plead.

Time Note

90 minutes. Pre-chosen cuts: Build question 2 (34:25-26 corpse-washing image) can fold into question 1; the second Dig Deeper goes home unread. Keep Luke 18 slow: it is the night's landing.

SESSION 9: DISCUSSION GUIDE

Session 9: The Prayer of the Humble Pierces the Clouds

Opening Prayer

Lord, you take no bribe and show no partiality, and yet the whisper of the lowly reaches your throne. As we study worship tonight, purify ours: reconcile us to our brothers, open our hands to your poor, and teach us the prayer that pierces the clouds. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win: Opening Questions

Win 1. Describe a time you attended worship (Mass or otherwise) while your heart was somewhere else entirely. What was that like from the inside?

Win 2. If someone gave your parish a large donation earned dishonestly, should the parish take it? Why or why not?

Build: Into the Text

1. Read Sirach 34:18-22. What kinds of offering does Ben Sira call blemished and abominable, and what is the ferocious comparison in verse 20? Verse 21 says the bread of the needy is the life of the poor. How does that line turn an economic act into something much darker?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Offerings from what was wrongfully obtained, sacrifices funded by the property of the poor. The comparison: like one who kills a son before his father's eyes: God watches his poor being robbed to fund his own worship, and receives it as murder performed in his sight. Verse 21's logic: for the poor, bread is not a line item but life itself; to withhold it is to take life, which is why verse 22 calls the withholder of wages a man of blood. Deuteronomy 24:14-15 stands behind it: the defrauded worker's cry to God counts against you.

2. Read Sirach 35:1-5. Ben Sira lists actions that count as offerings without an animal in sight: keeping the law, heeding commandments, returning kindness, giving alms, forsaking unrighteousness. Is he replacing Temple worship with ethics? Read verses 4-9 (do not appear before the Lord empty-handed... with every gift show a cheerful face) before you answer.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Not replacing: ordering. Verses 4-9 still command real offerings, gladly and generously given: glorify the Lord generously, and do not stint the first fruits. His claim is that obedience and mercy are the substance that makes ritual real: the same lesson as Samuel (to obey is better than sacrifice, 1 Samuel 15:22) and Hosea (I desire mercy and not sacrifice, 6:6). Note the almsgiving thread's final chord: he who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering (35:2): what began at 3:30 as water on fire ends here as incense on the altar. Mercy to the poor is worship.

LIVE DISCOVERY

3. Ben Sira is singing in a choir. Three readers: Isaiah 1:11-17, Psalm 51:16-17, then Psalm 51:18-19. What does each say God rejects, what does each say God wants, and what do Psalm 51's final verses prevent us from concluding?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Isaiah: God is weary of sacrifices offered by hands full of blood: wash yourselves, seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. Psalm 51: you take no delight in sacrifice... a broken and contrite heart you will not despise. But 51:18-19 completes the thought: after restoration, then you will delight in right sacrifices. The tradition never abolishes sacrifice; it refuses to let ritual launder injustice. The order is: contrition and justice first, then the offering God delights in. That order is about to reappear on the lips of Jesus.

4. Read Sirach 35:12-15a: the Lord is the judge, and with him is no partiality. He will not show partiality in the case of a poor man; and he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged. God refuses bribes and refuses favoritism, yet the surrounding verses say he hears the wronged, the orphan, and the widow. Is that a contradiction? What kind of judge is being described?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

No contradiction: it is what impartiality actually looks like in a tilted world. A bribable judge favors the rich by definition; a truly impartial one therefore hears the people who could never pay: the wronged, the orphan, the widow whose complaint pours down her cheeks. God's court is the one place on earth where having nothing is no disadvantage. The description indicts every human system where worship, access, or justice can be purchased, including subtle church versions of the same.

LIVE DISCOVERY

5. Now the summit, and its fulfillment. Read Sirach 35:17 aloud: the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds. Then someone read Matthew 5:23-24, and someone read Luke 18:9-14. Where does Jesus teach Ben Sira's whole doctrine of worship, and what is it about the tax collector's prayer that got through the ceiling?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Matthew 5: Jesus, at the altar, gives Ben Sira's order as a command: leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift: reconciliation precedes offering, or the offering waits. Luke 18: the Pharisee prays with himself, itemizing his assets; the tax collector stands far off and prays seven words: God, be merciful to me a sinner, and goes down to his house justified. What pierced the clouds was altitude: he prayed from the lowest place, with nothing to offer and no one to blame, exactly the humble prayer of 35:17. He who humbles himself will be exalted.

Land the Mass connection: this is why the Mass opens with a penitential act, often the Confiteor and Kyrie (we take the tax collector's position before we approach), and why, when the sign of peace is exchanged before Communion, it echoes Matthew 5:24, and why the sacrifice we plead is Christ's own: the one offering in history with no injustice anywhere in its funding. In him our worship is acceptable, and from him it sends us straight back out to the poor (35:2): the dismissal is part of the liturgy.

6. Read Sirach 35:18-20 to close (the Lord will not delay... till he repays the man according to his deeds... and does justice for his people). The humble pray and God vindicates, but on his clock. What does this promise do for the person praying from under injustice right now, and what does it forbid them?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

It promises that no humble prayer is filed away unread: the Judge has heard, the vindication is scheduled, and mercy will meet them as rain in drought. It forbids two things: despair (the clouds are pierced, even when the sky looks sealed) and revenge (the repaying is God's, Romans 12:19). Jesus attaches the same promise to the same posture: will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night?... he will vindicate them speedily (Luke 18:7-8), and then asks the only open question: when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth? Persevering, humble prayer is the faith he is looking for.

Dig Deeper

DIG DEEPER: The widow's tears

Sirach 35:14-15 pictures the widow's complaint pouring down her cheek as her testimony against the one who caused the tears. Jesus builds a whole parable on her: the persistent widow before the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8), told so that we ought always to pray and not lose heart. The lowest voice in Israel's social order is Scripture's chosen icon of prevailing prayer.

DIG DEEPER: The Offertory is not intermission

Watch the Mass this Sunday at the presentation of the gifts: bread and wine are brought to the altar, and the collection for the Church and the poor is presented and set in its proper place near, not on, the altar (GIRM 73). The Church is enacting Sirach 35: real gifts, gladly given, taken up into the Church's liturgical offering, with the poor written in from her earliest days (CCC 1351). Do not appear before the Lord empty-handed was not discarded; it is fulfilled and transposed: Christians bring their gifts freely, joined to the one Gift.

Send: Taking It Out

Send 1. Jesus' altar command is specific: if your brother has something against you, go first. Whose face appeared when you heard Matthew 5:23-24 tonight, and what will you do before next Sunday's Mass?

Send 2. Where might your worship be funded by injustice in ways you have not audited: how money is made, who is underpaid or overlooked so your life runs smoothly? What would an honest audit look like?

Live It This Week

- Before Sunday, do the Matthew 5:24 errand where possible and prudent: the apology, the text, the conversation you have been deferring. (Making peace with a neighbor does not replace Confession: anyone conscious of grave sin should seek the sacrament before Communion, CCC 1385.)
- Pray the tax collector's prayer (God, be merciful to me a sinner) ten times slowly each day this week, from the lowest interior place you can find.
- Arrive at Mass five minutes early and pray the Confiteor in advance, meaning every word, so the liturgy's front door does its work on you.

Closing Prayer

God, be merciful to us, sinners. Take from our hands every gift funded by another's loss, reconcile us before we reach your altar, and teach us the humble prayer that pierces the clouds. Through Christ our Lord, the one unblemished offering, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord." (**Sirach 35:17**)

Before next session: Read Sirach 38:1-23. Bring an honest opinion: how do faith, doctors, and medicine fit together?

SESSION 9: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

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Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 34:18-22
7. Sirach 35:1-5
8. Sirach 35:4-9
9. Isaiah 1:11-17
10. Psalm 51:16-19
11. Sirach 35:12-15
12. Sirach 35:17
13. Matthew 5:23-24
14. Luke 18:9-14
15. Sirach 35:18-20
16. Luke 18:1-8 (leader reference)
17. 1 Samuel 15:22 and Hosea 6:6 (leader reference)

Memory verse: Sirach 35:17, "The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord."