

SESSION 10: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session 10: Honor the Physician

Passage: Sirach 38:1-23, 24-34

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers Ben Sira's startlingly modern integration of faith and medicine, his wise and humane counsel on grief, and his praise of ordinary skilled work as what maintains the fabric of the world, and meets Jesus the carpenter and physician.

Catholic Touchstone: Christ the physician and the sacrament of the sick (CCC 1500-1510); the dignity and sanctification of human work (CCC 2427-2428).

What You Need to Know

Sirach 38 answers a question your group is quietly carrying: does trusting God mean distrusting doctors? Ben Sira's answer, unique in Scripture for its directness, is a resounding no: honor the physician with the honor due him, according to your need of him, for the Lord created him (38:1). The chain of gift runs: healing comes from the Most High (38:2), the Lord created medicines from the earth, and a sensible man will not despise them (38:4), the pharmacist compounds them, and by them the physician heals and takes away pain (38:7-8). The protocol of 38:9-12 holds it together: when sick, first pray, repent, and offer worship (38:9-11), AND give the physician his place, for the Lord created him; let him not leave you, for there is need of him (38:12): prayer and penicillin are not rivals; both descend from the same Father of gifts. There is even wry humor: he who sins before his Maker, may he fall into the care of a physician (38:15): a proverb with a wink.

Then 38:16-23, Ben Sira on grief, pastorally gold for young adults who have buried grandparents and sometimes friends: weep bitterly and wail... observe the mourning according to his merit (38:16-17): real grief is commanded, not embarrassed. And then the mercy of a limit: do not give your heart to sorrow; drive it away... do not forget, there is no coming back; you do him no good, and you injure yourself (38:20-21). Mourn truly, then let consolation come: the dead man is at rest (38:23), and your duty is to the living and to your own soul. The Christian completion the group will find: we grieve, but not as others do who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13): hope does not cancel tears (Jesus wept, John 11:35); it changes what the tears believe.

Finally 38:24-34, the craftsmen: the farmer, the seal-engraver, the smith, the potter, each absorbed in his work, keeping stable the fabric of the world (38:34). Ben Sira notes honestly that they will not sit in the assembly or expound proverbs (the scribe's leisure enables that, 38:24, 33), but he will not let anyone despise them: without them a city cannot be inhabited... they keep stable the fabric of the world, and their prayer is in the practice of their trade (38:32-34). The live discovery lands it: the eternal Wisdom we met in Session 8 spent most of his earthly life not teaching but building: is not this the carpenter? (Mark 6:3). The Incarnation dignified ordinary work for ever. Connect for your group: HVAC installs, nursing shifts, spreadsheets, diapers: done with skill and offered to God, these maintain the fabric of the world and are a prayer in the practice of the trade.

OT Roots and Fulfillment

Israel's earlier tradition was wary of medicine practiced as rival to God (King Asa is faulted for seeking physicians and not the Lord, 2 Chronicles 16:12: the and not is the sin). Ben Sira resolves the tension by locating

the physician inside God's providence: creation itself is medicinal (was not water made sweet with a tree? 38:5, remembering Exodus 15:23-25). On work, the roots run to Genesis 2:15 (man placed in the garden to till and keep it: work precedes the Fall) and to the Spirit-filled craftsman Bezalel, the first person in Scripture said to be filled with the Spirit of God, for the making of the tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-5).

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Basil the Great

Asked whether using medicine is consistent with piety, Basil answered that the medical art was given by God as a model of the healing of the soul, and that to reject its benefits out of pretended trust is obstinacy, while to place all hope in it and forget God is to dishonor the Giver of every remedy. Each herb was made for our aid, he taught, and gratitude refers every healing back to the Giver.

The Long Rules, Question 55 (paraphrased)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. John Paul II

In his letter on the meaning of suffering, John Paul taught that Christ did not explain suffering away but transformed it from within by his Passion, so that every sufferer can complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions (Colossians 1:24): not because the Cross lacks power, but because Christ leaves room for our share in his redeeming love. Suffering, joined to him, becomes fruitful.

Salvifici Doloris, 19-26 (paraphrased)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Josemaría Escrivá

The founder of Opus Dei preached that ordinary work, done with human competence and supernatural love, is the hinge of holiness for the laity: God waits for us every day in the laboratory, the operating theater, the workshop, the field. Sanctify your work, he urged: sanctify yourself in it, and sanctify others through it.

Conversations, with the homily Passionately Loving the World (paraphrased and synthesized from his preaching)

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 1500-1505:** Illness and the mystery of suffering; Christ the physician, whose compassion toward the sick and healings are a resplendent sign of salvation.
- **CCC 1509-1510:** The Church continues Christ's healing mission: care for the sick, prayer, and the sacrament of Anointing.
- **CCC 2427-2428:** Human work proceeds from persons made in God's image; in work the person exercises and fulfills part of the potential inscribed in his nature.

Thread Watch

- **DEVELOP (Fear of the Lord):** 38:9 sends the sick man first to prayer and cleansing of heart: the fearer of the Lord meets even illness coram Deo, before the face of God. One session remains before the thread resolves in the Temple.

Session Goals

1. Trace the chain of gift in 38:1-8: God, earth, medicine, pharmacist, physician: one providence.
2. Learn the protocol of 38:9-15: pray first, repent, offer worship, and give the physician his place: both-and, not either-or.
3. Receive Ben Sira's grief counsel (38:16-23): mourn truly, then return to the living, and complete it with 1 Thessalonians 4:13.
4. Honor the craftsmen of 38:24-34 who maintain the fabric of the world, and meet the carpenter of Nazareth.
5. Send each person to sanctify one ordinary shift of work this week as prayer.

Time Note

90 minutes, comfortable. Pre-chosen cuts: Build question 3 (38:15's wry proverb) folds into question 2; the Bezalel Dig Deeper goes home unread. Give the grief section room: someone in the group needs it.

SESSION 10: DISCUSSION GUIDE

Session 10: Honor the Physician

Opening Prayer

Father of gifts, from whom descends every good thing: the herb, the healer, the craftsman's skill, and the hope that outlives the grave. Teach us tonight to honor what you have made, to grieve as those who hope, and to work as those who pray. Through Christ our Lord, the carpenter and the physician. Amen.

Win: Opening Questions

Win 1. Doctors, dentists, therapists: which do you avoid longest, and what is your actual excuse?

Win 2. What is a piece of skilled work you have watched someone do (a trade, a craft, a save, a repair) that struck you as almost beautiful?

Build: Into the Text

1. Read Sirach 38:1-8. Map the chain: who created the physician (38:1)? Where does healing come from (38:2)? Where do medicines come from, and who is warned not to despise them (38:4)? What is God doing through the pharmacist and physician (38:6-8)? What does this chain do to the assumption that trusting God and trusting medicine compete?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

The Lord created the physician; healing comes from the Most High; the Lord created medicines from the earth, and a sensible man will not despise them; God gave men skill that he might be glorified in his marvelous works, and by medicines the physician heals and takes away pain. The chain abolishes the competition: the doctor is not an alternative to God but an instrument of God, the way the farmer is God's instrument for daily bread. To despise medicine in the name of faith is to refuse a gift while praising the Giver. Verse 5 even grounds it in the Exodus: was not water made sweet with a tree? God has healed through created means since Marah.

2. Read the sick man's protocol, 38:9-12. Put the steps in order: what comes first (38:9-11), and what comes and stays (38:12: give the physician his place... let him not leave you)? Why does Ben Sira sequence it this way, and what do the two errors look like that this protocol prevents?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

First: pray to the Lord, do not be negligent; then cleanse your heart from sin (illness is a summons to examine, not proof of guilt), offer your worship: and then, without contradiction, give the physician his place, for the Lord created him. Prayer first because God is the source and healing's deepest register is the soul; the physician retained because God ordinarily heals through means. The two errors prevented: the pious error (refusing medicine as if faith required it: King Asa inverted, 2 Chronicles 16:12's sin was seeking physicians and not the Lord, not seeking physicians at all) and the secular error (treating the body as a machine and never letting illness ask its spiritual question). Ben Sira's both-and is the Catholic instinct: grace works through nature: water in baptism, oil in anointing, medicine in healing.

3. Read Sirach 38:16-23, the grief passage, slowly. What does Ben Sira command in 38:16-17, and what does he command in 38:20-23? These sound opposite. How do they fit together, and what is humane about each? What is the one thing his era could not yet say, and where does the New Testament say it? (Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14.)

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Commanded first: my son, let your tears fall for the dead... weep bitterly and wail... observe the mourning according to his merit: grief is owed, real, embodied, and unembarrassed. Commanded second: do not give your heart to sorrow; drive it away, remembering the end... you do him no good, and you injure yourself... when the dead is at rest, let his remembrance cease (in the sense of releasing active grief, not forgetting love). The fit: mourn truly, then return to the living: grief is a road through, not an address. What Ben Sira could not yet say, Paul says: we grieve, but not as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Hope does not cancel the tears (Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb knowing what he was about to do, John 11:35): it changes what the tears believe.

Pastoral note: if grief in the group surfaces, slow down and let it. Also name plainly: grief that cannot lift for months, that steals sleep and function, deserves help: a priest, a counselor, a doctor (tonight's chapter has already told us the physician is God's gift). The chapter's logic extends to grief: receiving skilled help is receiving God's gift (38:12, by extension).

4. Read Sirach 38:24-30: the scribe's leisure, then the farmer absorbed in his furrows, the craftsman at his seal, the smith at the anvil, the potter at his wheel, each one careful to complete his work (38:27). Ben Sira says frankly these workers will not be sought out for counsel or sit in the assembly (38:32-33). Is he looking down on them? Read 38:31-34 before answering: what is his final verdict on skilled ordinary work?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

No: he is being honest about vocations while refusing the contempt that usually rides on that honesty. The verdict: without them a city cannot be inhabited... they keep stable the fabric of the world, and their prayer is in the practice of their trade (38:31-34). The scribe writes proverbs; the smith keeps the city alive: both are needed, and the workshop is a house of prayer. That last clause deserves a full stop: their prayer is in the practice of their trade: honest work done with excellence and offered to God becomes real prayer and a spiritual sacrifice acceptable through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5). The Second Vatican Council teaches exactly this: the ordinary work, prayers, and daily life of the laity become spiritual sacrifices, offered to the Father along with the Lord's Body in the Eucharist (Lumen Gentium 34). Not liturgy in the strict sacramental sense, but truly offerable, and offered.

LIVE DISCOVERY

5. The Wisdom of God we unveiled in Session 8 had a trade. Someone find Mark 6:2-3 and read the townspeople's astonished question. What did the eternal Word spend roughly nine-tenths of his earthly years doing, and what does that fact do to Sirach 38's teaching on work? Then read Matthew 9:12-13: what does Jesus call himself, and how does tonight's whole chapter converge on him?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary? The Word through whom all things were made spent the long hidden years (Luke 3:23 puts him near thirty when his ministry begins) making the things a village needs, keeping stable the fabric of Nazareth with calloused hands, before the public ministry. The Incarnation dignified ordinary work for ever: if the workshop was good enough for eternal Wisdom, no honest trade is beneath a child of God, and none of it is wasted time in God's economy. And Matthew 9:12-13: those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick: Jesus reaches for Sirach 38's honored image to describe his own mission, physician of bodies (the healings) and of souls (I came not to call the righteous, but sinners, 9:13). Tonight's chapter converges on one person: the carpenter-physician, who worked, wept at a tomb, healed the sick, and turned suffering itself into the instrument of salvation.

For our group specifically: the sales call, the install, the nursing shift, the classroom, the spreadsheet, the diaper: done with skill and offered to him, these maintain the fabric of the world, and their prayer is in the practice of the trade.

6. Close with Sirach 38:34's phrase, their prayer is in the practice of their trade, next to St. Paul: whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus (Colossians 3:17), and whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men (3:23). What would it concretely look like for your actual Monday work to be prayer, and what would disqualify work from being offerable?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Concretely: begin the shift with an offering (a Morning Offering does this in thirty seconds); do the work with genuine competence (shoddy work is a shoddy offering: the craftsmen were careful to complete their work); treat the people in it as Christ (the customer, the patient, the difficult coworker); and refuse the shortcuts that would make the work dishonest, because (Session 9) an offering funded by injustice is blemished. What disqualifies work from being offered is not its lowliness (nothing was lowlier than a Nazareth workshop) but its dishonesty: fraud cannot be consecrated. Everything else, offered, ascends.

Dig Deeper

DIG DEEPER: Bezalel, the first Spirit-filled man

The first person Scripture describes as filled with the Spirit of God is not a prophet or priest but a craftsman: Bezalel, filled with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to make the tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-5). The Spirit's debut in a human resume is skilled manual work in God's service. Ben Sira's craftsmen, and every tradesman since, stand in his line.

DIG DEEPER: Anointing of the Sick is not last rites only

The sacrament of Anointing (James 5:14-15: is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil) is for the seriously ill, the elderly in weakness, and those about to undergo a serious operation (CCC 1515): not only the dying. It can be received more than once. If illness touches your family, call the parish early, not only at the end (CCC 1514-1515).

Send: Taking It Out

Send 1. Where have you been running either error: refusing help (medical, psychological, or otherwise) in the name of toughness or faith, or managing your body and mind as a machine while never letting illness or fatigue ask its spiritual question?

Send 2. Whose grief around you has passed the point where the casseroles stopped but the sorrow did not? What would Sirach 38's balanced mercy (real presence, gentle return to life) look like from you this month?

Live It This Week

- Offer one full workday this week explicitly: Morning Offering at the start, competence as worship during, and a one-line prayer of presentation at the end: Lord, this shift is yours.
- If you have been postponing a medical, dental, or counseling appointment, book it this week: Sirach 38:12 is now your verse.
- Pray by name for one person who is sick and one person who is grieving, each day this week, and send one of them a message that proves someone remembers.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, carpenter of Nazareth and physician of souls: bless the healers and the makers, teach us to grieve with hope, and receive our ordinary work as prayer. When we are sick, give us both faith and medicine with a grateful heart, and when we suffer, join it to your Cross and let none of it be wasted. Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"My son, when you are sick do not be negligent, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you." (**Sirach 38:9**)

Before next session: Read Sirach 44:1-15. Then skim the famous names in chapters 44-49 and pick one ancestor whose story you half-remember.

Session 10: Honor the Physician

Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 38:1-8
7. Sirach 38:9-12
8. Sirach 38:15
9. Sirach 38:16-23
10. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14
11. John 11:35 (within discussion)
12. Sirach 38:24-30
13. Sirach 38:31-34
14. Mark 6:2-3
15. Matthew 9:12
16. Colossians 3:17, 23
17. Exodus 31:1-5 (take-home reading)
18. 2 Chronicles 16:12 (leader reference)

Memory verse: Sirach 38:9, "My son, when you are sick do not be negligent, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you."