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Sirach 11:7–9, **NRSV.**

7 *Do not find fault before you investigate;*
examine first, and then criticize.
8 *Do not answer before you listen,*
and do not interrupt when another is speaking.
9 *Do not argue about a matter that does not concern you,*
and do not sit with sinners when they judge a case.

Sirach: *Wisdom for social media*.

Sirach is a Book of Wisdom, and most Protestants consider it to be Apocryphal, meaning it is "of doubtful authenticity", but simply because it was written late, after most recognized Hebrew Scripture. It is in the official canon, or Bible, of the Roman Catholic and Easter Orthodox Churches. Apparently, the original name of the book is *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, which is stated in Chapter 50:

27 *Instruction in understanding and knowledge*
I have written in this book,
Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem,
whose mind poured forth wisdom.

Sirach is the Greek form of the Hebrew-derived name Sira. The book is written entirely as Hebrew poetry, and it is a collection of wise sayings or moral axioms, very much like Proverbs. It was written around 185 B.C. We believe that the

author, Ben Sira, was a teacher of young Jewish men, teaching them how to live ethically and take positions in religious leadership. Sirach's grandson translated the Book of Sirach to Greek while in Egypt around 132 B.C. Like the authors of Proverbs, the single author of Sirach was a Sage, a member of a respected class of scholars in Israelite society. He lived in Jerusalem. He was a deep lover of the Law, the priesthood, and Temple worship. The Sages were astute observers of life. Sirach discusses a wide range of philosophical topics, including friendship, money, controlling one's speech, self-discipline, and faith. During Sirach's life (from about 250 B.C. to 175 B.C.), the Holy Land was under the control of Greek-speaking colonizers, first the Ptolemies of Egypt, and then the Seleucids of Syria. These groups were related to two of Alexander the Great's top generals among whom his empire was divided after his death in 323 B.C., at the age of 32. During this period when Sirach's world was controlled by Greek-speaking people, Jerusalem was very heavily taxed. To gain access to economic advantages, Jews would learn to speak and write Greek. This is why the New Testament is written in Greek, why Paul and other New Testament authors were conversant in Greek. It's clear from his book that Sirach was highly knowledgeable about the Hebrew Scriptures, and had a broad knowledge of secular, non-Jewish writings, much of it in Greek. It is strongly believed that the Book of Sirach had a powerful influence

on the New Testament authors. Its influence can be found in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Luke's parables of the Rich Fool and the Unjust Judge, and James' letter in his language about controlling one's tongue.

The 24th chapter of Sirach contains a highly studied and quite famous first-person monologue, in poetry form, like the entire book, told from the perspective of Wisdom itself, which is characterized as a female. She plays a prominent role in Chapters 1, 15, 24, and 51 of Sirach. Scholars call this speaker "Lady Wisdom". In this chapter, the author makes statements that are reminiscent of the first 18 verses of the Gospel of John, which begins with the famous words:

1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [2] He was in the beginning with God. [3] All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being [4] in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. [5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

There are other places in Sirach that are quite reminiscent of the Gospel of John. More subtly, at times it feels almost like Sirach and John were written by the same person. It's clear that John was heavily influenced by Sirach, and this is one reason for us to take the Book of Sirach very seriously. Lady Wisdom in Sirach and Jesus in John's Gospel are both present at Creation; Lady Wisdom is "*brought forth*" by God and Jesus is "*begotten*" by God; Lady Wisdom goes into the streets to invite humanity to a life of truth and virtue, and in the Gospel of John, Jesus

calls himself "*the way, the truth and the life*". We will consider small parts of Sirach. One scholar's organization of the book breaks it into 8 sections:

1. *Understanding Wisdom.*
2. *Using Wisdom Personally.*
3. *Applying Wisdom Socially.*
4. *Wisdom in Speech and Thought.*
5. *Wisdom in Domestic Life.*
6. *Using Wisdom to Make Good Decisions.*
7. *Demonstrating the Results of Wisdom.*
8. *Wisdom in Creation and History.*

Here is 15:14-17, which is in section 4, *Wisdom in Thought and Speech*:

14 It was he who created humankind in the beginning,
and he left them in the power of their own free choice.
15 If you choose, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.
16 He has placed before you fire and water;
stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.
17 Before each person are life and death,
and whichever one chooses will be given.

This begins by making it clear that we are born with free will, and it ends by reminding us that we are therefore responsible for the results of our actions. God created us, giving us freedom to decide if we will live by God's laws. We can thus put our hand in water or in fire, choosing life or death. It's up to us.

I received extensive Christian training as a boy, and much of it was focused on this exact point. When I was in high school, a Catholic school, in Religion Class we did not focus much on the Bible (which is too bad), or on memorizing prayers,

or on hot button political issues related to morality. Rather, we were taught how live. Often, it had nothing to do with Christian theology or doctrine. This was in the shadow of the hippie generation and much of America was embracing the notion that we should live in peace. We learned about kindness, humility, honesty, and simple living. This is 5:9-12, from *Using Wisdom Personally*:

9 Do not winnow in every wind,
or follow every path.
10 Stand firm for what you know,
and let your speech be consistent.
11 Be quick to hear,
but deliberate in answering.
12 If you know what to say, answer your neighbor;
but if not, put your hand over your mouth.

This begins with advice on not following trends or giving in to popular opinion. "*Winnow*" refers to throwing grain into the wind to separate out the chaff. But if that is all you do, you will be throwing all your grain away. We must also have conviction and stand for what we know is the truth, while remembering that if you say one thing one day, and then the opposite the next, your word means nothing. We must listen rather than speak because this is the way to gain an understanding of other people. Finally, when you do speak, make sure you know what you are talking about and you are not just expressing ignorant biases. This is a lesson that countless people on social media need to learn today. YouTube and TikTok are full of heavily slanted, harmful, deliberately divisive videos.

This is Sirach 29:21-23, from the *Wisdom in Domestic Life* section.

21 The necessities of life are water, bread, and clothing,
and also a house to assure privacy.
22 Better is the life of the poor under their own crude roof
than sumptuous food in the house of others.
23 Be content with little or much,
and you will hear no reproach for being a guest.

This tells us that the way to live with dignity and independence is to need little, to not become dependent on others. This will also help us interpersonally. No matter how much we gather in life, if we are content spiritually, and we are not always trying to get things from other people, we will always be welcome among them, and they will help us when we are truly in need.

But we are supposed to enjoy life. God didn't put us here to sacrifice each day and to live without joy. Earthly pleasures, in moderation, are good. Consider this from Sirach, 11:18-19, from the *Applying Wisdom Socially* section:

18 One becomes rich through diligence and self-denial,
and the reward allotted to him is this:
19 when he says, "I have found rest,
and now I shall feast on my goods!"
he does not know how long it will be
until he leaves them to others and dies.

We can get caught up in becoming well off and collecting the things of this world. But the day will come when we die. All that we have accumulated will be left behind. All things belong to God in the end, and God will give them to someone

else. We may as well enjoy the produce of our labor while we are on Earth. There is a subtlety here. We must not fall for the typical subconscious belief that we will live forever. Our earthly lives and all that we have are temporary gifts.

In school, we did not study Sirach much and only briefly the Proverbs. But many years later when I became far more familiar with the Bible, I was intrigued to learn that the Bible reflects much of what I was taught, and in truth, I was being fed biblical material without realizing it. Common, moral training turned out to be scriptural wisdom. One Religion teacher I had in high school was an older woman; we will call her Mrs. Evans. She used the Bible sometimes, but often not. Mrs. Evans would give us tests where there would be questions like:

True or False: Calmness is better than panic in a bad situation.

Her questions, I realize now, were very Sirach-like. One day, when Mrs. Evans handed back one of her tests, there were students who complained that her tests were too easy, that there was nothing new, and the answers were all obvious. Others joined in and said yeah, the tests are trivial. Mrs. Evans responded with a big smile. That's the whole point, she said. Living in a good way should be obvious. It's just that we all must be told what is obvious before we embrace it. This is because we're too busy to think of obvious things ourselves. This is why we don't live the right way, why we get angry, act unkindly, and panic in a bad

situation. More subtlety, in my opinion today, we don't all live the way the Bible tells us to live because Christianity teaches us general truths about life, morality, and ethics. Our faith does not give us specific instructions on what to do in every situation in life. When something requires a decision, we must ask ourselves how to apply what we know to what is happening in that specific moment. Life is complex. There is no way to create a rigid sets of rules that mechanically tell us how to make each decision. There are legitimate tradeoffs in life, like balancing living in a simple way with enjoying the things that this world provides. And the world around us is corrupt. We are confronted with people doing evil things. If we always go against what everyone else says and does, we'll make enemies. Life can be hard. We can feel defeated, and being hard on someone else, being ungracious can, for a moment at least, make us feel better. It's a challenge to live in a society packed closely together, competing to get by financially. With so many strangers around us, and with being nameless on the Internet so easy, it's tempting to be selfish, to cut someone down and call it simple honesty and not misdirected vengeance. Chimpanzees are our closest animal relatives, DNA-wise. They live in groups of less than 100. If you put chimpanzees in situations that are more crowded than this, they react very negatively to the increased social complexity. They are highly intelligent, but they will break into civil war, and

instead of working together to find food and protect themselves from predators, they'll start killing each other. As humans, we've created a global society, where nations that are physically far apart battle over conflicting social traditions and finite resources. Social media has given rise to an extreme sense of anonymity, where people lose their inhibitions, bully each other, present extreme opinions as fact, let themselves vent, and in general act like a chimpanzee society of 1,000. Now, more than ever we need a return to learning the way I did as a boy.

There are things in Sirach that we would not want to imitate, due to its ancient nature and the biases of the society within which it was written. This is true of other parts of the Old Testament. There is material in there that is very sexist by today's standards, tacitly supports slavery, and promotes extremely harsh physical punishments. We do have to read everything, including Scripture, in the context of when and where it was written. Sirach himself is far from the perfect human. But the bulk of the book contains extremely solid wisdom. Sirach advises young people on acting with knowledge, having faith, living well-rounded and well-grounded lives, having self-discipline, building positive relationships, and being humble. Sirach would be a beautiful thing, if read in proper historical context, to teach from. One of the most important aspects of Sirach is that, again, if we remember that it was written in a society that had its own problems, it is

timeless. There are also many things in it that are quite thoughtful and not totally obvious. Consider this, from Chapter 11, the *Using Wisdom Personally* Section:

7 Do not find fault before you investigate;
examine first, and then criticize.
8 Do not answer before you listen,
and do not interrupt when another is speaking.
9 Do not argue about a matter that does not concern you,
and do not sit with sinners when they judge a case.

This is very important advice for today. We should not make superficial judgements without thoughtful reasoning and thorough research. We don't want to be part of "cancel culture". We don't act on rumors or polarized political beliefs. We put a focus on listening, rather than insisting on being heard and respected. We keep out of conflicts where we can only do more harm. And we don't align ourselves with malicious people who are seeking to hurt, not heal.

There is much more continuity in Sirach than in Proverbs. A single idea will carry through many verses. It makes it far less disjoint and choppy. It is enjoyable to sit down and read. Since it was written by a single brilliant individual, Sirach repeats themes in a cleverly ordered way, giving a beautiful rhythm to the book.

Mrs. Evans told us that we should do some traveling is life. Once she did read to us from the Book of Sirach and she said that she had found a passage in Sirach that affirmed the importance of spending time visiting other cultures and

talking to people who are not like us. I am sure that at this point she understood that even the most fundamental wisdom is not always obvious and must be taught. By saying that wisdom is obvious, I think she was challenging us to infer on our own basic ethical behavior. But she knew that one of the most beautiful aspects of ancient Israelite society is that they passed wisdom down in a highly disciplined way, and that this is necessary. I don't know what passage Mrs. Evans read, but it was similar to the following one, I believe. This is from Chapter 39, the section typically called *Demonstrating the Results of Wisdom*:

4 *He serves among the great*
and appears before rulers;
he travels in foreign lands
and learns what is good and evil in the human lot.

We should always be open to learning from those who are more knowledge than us, or who have experiences that we have not had. Ancient Sages in the days of the Hebrew Bible often served leaders and government advisors, and Sirach is saying that he learned a lot by doing this. This passage also says that by exposing ourselves to people who are different than us, we can gain a much broader understanding of humanity, and we can develop a much deeper understanding of just what it means to be a good person. I have only recently realized that Mrs. Evans was a modern Sage. I was blessed to have been taught by her.