



Holiness: The Heart God Purifies (Group Leader Guide)

Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth

As You Begin

For most believers, holiness is a concept that evokes mixed emotions and at best, seems shrouded in mystery. But no word better captures the splendor of who God is and the destination to which He has called us.

The call to pursue holiness is an invitation to experience the blessings and joys of intimacy with God, to be free from the weight and the burden of sin, and to become all He created us to be.

The study of holiness raises many challenging questions and issues. The purpose of this study is not to answer all those questions or solve all those theological dilemmas, but to encourage you to take a fresh look at our holy God and to engage in a lifelong pursuit of the holiness to which He has called us.

Getting Your Bearings

When you think you may be lost, one of the first things you try to do is get your bearings —to figure out where you are in relation to where you want to be. Do you know where you are in relation to the matter of holiness? Here are a few questions to help you find out. Respond as honestly as possible. You'll be asked to revisit these questions at the end of this study, so you can see in what direction you're headed.

1. How important is holiness to you? How much thought, attention, and effort do you devote to the pursuit of holiness? Are you intentional about putting away everything that is displeasing to God and living a holy life?

2. [if applicable] How important is your children's holiness to you? (A good gauge— do you care more about their grade point average, their batting average, and their earning capacity, or about their purity of heart and life?) Does their sin drive you to your knees?

3. How concerned are you about the holiness of the body of Christ? Does it grieve you when you see yourself or others treating sin lightly?

An Important Reminder

Any discussion of holiness necessarily involves the discussion of sin. It's important to remember two helpful boundaries when discussing sin in a group setting:

1. Confess your own sin—not someone else's. No fair confessing your spouse's sin, your children's sin, your best friend's sin—just your own! If someone else sinned against you in a particular situation, you don't need to supply those details and cause someone else in the group to stumble by taking up an offense.

2. Speaking of details, you don't need many to be biblically accurate in your confession. Identify biblical categories of sin that apply to your situation; avoid sharing unnecessary details of the sinful action itself. It's enough for the group to know that you are convicted of gossiping about someone else—without repeating the gossip! Or that you spoke harshly to your spouse—without repeating the insult you uttered to him or her. Too much detail isn't helpful or necessary in most cases. A good rule to remember is that unless someone has been part of the problem or is being used by God as part of the solution (e.g., an accountability partner, a pastor), repeating the details may just be gossip.

Tips for Group Leaders

Open and close each meeting by praying together. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you through the Word, to help you be real with one another, and to bring about any needed change in each heart.

Seek to lead by example. You can serve your group best by modeling a heart for holiness—being the first to confess your own sin and the first to encourage others in God's grace at work in them.

Some of the questions in this discussion guide call for a level of transparency and openness that many people are not accustomed to. Encourage the members of your group to respect each other's privacy by not discussing others' contributions outside of this group. Remind them that God is patient and gracious with us as He conforms us to the image of His Son, and that we need to extend the same patience and grace toward each other.

This discussion guide is designed to be used in a variety of contexts—from small groups to Sunday school classes. Feel free to direct the discussion based on the size of your group and the allotted time. Avoid rabbit trails into secondary or unrelated issues. However, don't feel pressured to get through all the questions each time you meet.

Depending on your available time and the size and openness of your group, you may end up only discussing two or three questions. The goal is to grow together in your understanding of God and His ways and to experience individually and as a group the reality of the message of this book.

Keep your group centered on the truth of the gospel: We are all sinners in need of a Savior. Help your members steer clear of self-righteous responses to the confessions of others in the group and from condemnation about their own performance by pointing them to the One who is both the author and perfecter of their faith (Hebrews 12:2).

Introduction

Getting started

What motivated you to read this book and begin this study? What do you hope to get out of it?

Opening Prayer

The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions is rich food for the soul. Read aloud the prayer at the beginning of Holiness —either as a group in unison, or have one or more individuals read while others listen. Then discuss this prayer:

- What words or phrases in this prayer describe our natural, sinful condition? What feeling(s) or reaction do those words evoke in you?
- What words or phrases describe God—His character, His grace, and His work on behalf of repentant sinners?
- What words/phrases describe the sinner’s appropriate response to this holy, redeeming God?

Going Deeper

1. Review the letter quoted on pages 18 and 19. Briefly discuss the questions that follow: “[Is this couple] wrong? Are they unnecessarily uptight or narrow-minded? Do these issues really matter? Or are they simply a matter of personal conscience? Do they change with the culture?” (p. 19). What Scriptures come to mind that could apply to the issues this couple is wrestling with? (Resist the urge to spend your whole time on this exercise or to end up in a debate about these particular issues! Just share some initial responses and move on.)

2. What have you heard, seen, or experienced recently—in your own life or in others—that highlights the need for holiness among God’s people? (Be sure not to reflect negatively on other believers by sharing specific names or private details.) 3. “Holiness and sin both matter— more than we can imagine. They matter to God, and the more we comprehend their true nature, the more they will matter to us” (pp. 20–21). Do you think

“holiness and sin” matter enough to most believers? If not, why not, and what could increase our sense of their importance?

4. “I invite you to join me in a radical pursuit of holiness” (p. 21). What do you think that kind of pursuit might look like? What might be involved in such a pursuit? Do you find this challenge a bit scary? Daunting? Appealing? Why?

5. Discuss the David Brainerd quote at the beginning of the Introduction. What could give someone such an intense burden and longing for holiness and for “more of God”? What do you think Brainerd meant by “this pleasing pain”? What does it mean to “press after God”? Have you ever experienced this kind of intense desire in your own heart?

Concluding Prayer

If it expresses the desire of your hearts, one at a time, have each member of the group read aloud the prayer on pp. 19–20.

On Your Own

If you’ve not already done so, take the challenge to pray the prayer on pp. 19–20 at least once a day for the next thirty days. Begin to take note of how God is answering this prayer in your life.

Grace Note

Our natural flesh has no appetite for holiness, so don’t be discouraged if your honest answers to the questions at the beginning of this study (p. 184) reveal that you are not sufficiently concerned about holiness in your life or the lives of those around you—right now. Remember that God gives grace to the humble. You are on a journey, and God won’t leave you where you are today.

Chapter One: The Splendor of Holiness

Getting Started

“Holiness isn’t exactly an easy subject to ‘sell’” (p. 23). Do you agree? If so, why do you think that is the case?

Going Deeper

1. Discuss C. S. Lewis’s quote at the beginning of the chapter (p. 23). Do you think most unbelievers think of “holiness” as something dull or as something irresistible? Why? What about most believers? Why?
2. Review the two facets of holiness explained in this chapter (pp. 29–33).
3. In what sense is holiness the fruit of a relationship?

4. What is the resource that gives us the desire and the power to be holy?
5. “To resist holiness or to be halfhearted about its pursuit is to forfeit true joy” (p. 39). Do you agree? How would you explain to someone else the connection between holiness and joy ?
6. This chapter included the account of the elderly couple who moved out of their home and left nothing behind that was inconsistent with their profession of faith (pp. 36–37). Do you think the same thing would be said if someone were to go through “the record of your life”? If not, what would you need to do for that to be true?
7. How do you respond to the concept of “extreme holiness” found in this chapter?

Pray About It

Thank God for His nature and character. Ask Him to give you a new sense of joy and delight in the concept of holiness.

On Your Own

Begin to highlight and make a list of every reference to holiness that you come across in the Scripture (include words like holy, clean, pure, righteousness, upright , etc.). Continue to do so throughout the course of this study.

Grace Note

At times our desires for sin feel so strong that the prospect of pursuing “extreme holiness” may seem burdensome. C. S. Lewis uses a wonderful word picture that helps put things in proper perspective: If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are halfhearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

Chapter Two: The Motivation for Holiness

Getting Started

Name an individual you have known who has “made God believable” to you. What is it about their life that has increased your desire to know God and to become more like Him?

Going Deeper

1. “Why care about being holy? Why be willing to say no to your flesh and yes to God, day in and day out?” (p. 60). Review the seven biblical motivations for holy living considered in this chapter.
2. Did any of these points raise a thought you had not seriously considered before as a motivation to pursue holiness?
3. Which of these motivations do you find particularly compelling in terms of your personal pursuit of holiness?
4. Holiness is God’s stated goal for every believer. What lesser, competing priorities can tend to consume our time, energy, and focus as believers?
5. How does Christ’s sacrifice on the cross provide a motivation to pursue holiness?
6. Can you think of an example of an unbeliever whose view of God was negatively affected by something they saw in a so-called Christian? What about an instance in which an unbeliever was drawn to Christ because of what they saw in a believer?
7. Identify as many categories as you can of people who are watching you and who may either choose or reject the pathway of holiness, based on the example of your life (e.g., your family, colleagues at work).
8. “This world is just a dressing room—a staging area for eternity. How much attention and effort are you devoting to preparing for the move to your eternal home?” (p. 56). What kinds of things could/should you be doing now to get ready for that move?

On Your Own

Continue compiling biblical references to holiness. As you review your list, note which of the passages might fall under one of the seven motivations for holy living.

Grace Note

On the topic of holiness, it can’t be repeated too often: While we do bear personal responsibility for our choices, holiness is not anything we can work up in our own strength. It’s grace in action. Remember that every small victory in changing your motivations is a reason to vigorously praise God for His divine help!

Chapter Three: The Enemy of Holiness

Getting Started

This chapter opens with a story of a man who underestimated the true nature of grizzly bears. Have you ever underestimated something extremely dangerous—a storm, an animal, explosives? Share your story and what you learned.

Going Deeper

1. How did this chapter influence your understanding of and your attitude toward sin?
2. “I wonder if we could be so cavalier about sin if we had any comprehension of how God views it” (p. 71). How does God view our sin? Why is it important to come to grips with the fact that our sin is a relational offense against God? How does the image of spiritual adultery affect your perspective on your sin?
3. “I’ve become comfortable with a certain level of sin in my life” (p. 66). Can you relate to that confession? If so, share an example (past or present) of how you have become desensitized and come to accept sin in your life in “tolerable” doses.
4. “Beyond how sin affects a holy God and how it affects others, it also exacts a price from those who sin” (pp. 71–72). Discuss the four consequences of sin considered in this chapter (pp. 72–75). Between the members of your group, see if you can come up with a real-life illustration of each of those consequences.
5. “There is no such thing as a small sin . Every unconfessed sin is a seed that will produce a multiplied harvest” (p. 76). Can you think of an illustration of this principle in your own experience?
6. Does your general attitude and response toward your own sin indicate that you take it seriously and that you are grieved by that which grieves God’s heart?
7. In this chapter you read the sad story of a man ensnared by the sin of adultery, who thought he’d be able to extricate himself, only to discover he couldn’t. There may be those in your group or among your relationships who are struggling with some sinful entanglement.

Galatians 6:1–10 is a helpful passage for such situations. According to this passage . . .

- How are we to think of ourselves?
- How are we to help others?
- What principles or insights do you see in vv. 6–10 that could be helpful to someone caught in a sinful snare (or to keep someone from falling into a snare)?

Pray About It

Review the J. C. Ryle quote on pages 75–76. Then take time to pray for a clearer view of the enemy of holiness—sin. Ask the Holy Spirit to convict you and others in your group of any sins that have become like “familiar grizzly bears.” If time permits, you may want to break down into smaller groups of men and women for confession and prayer, as appropriate.

On Your Own

Page 75 refers to several people who grew accustomed to their sin or treated it lightly—Nebuchadnezzar, Samson, Achan, and Ananias and Sapphira. What did each of these individuals believe sin would “deliver” for them and how were they deceived?

Grace Note

Some who read this chapter may be tempted to morbid introspection and melancholy. If that is your response, remember this: yes, sin is the enemy within and the wages of sin is death. But Christ has overcome that enemy. Be sobered by your sin, but rejoice in your Savior!

Chapter Four: The Face of Holiness

Getting Started

What did you learn from the accounts of Nebuchadnezzar, Samson, Achan, and Ananias and Sapphira about the nature and consequences of sin?

Going Deeper

1. Have you ever experienced the kind of struggle, sense of defeat, or discouragement over your sin that Hudson Taylor describes?
2. How would you explain what it was that was so transformational in Taylor’s walk with God?
3. “A pursuit of holiness that is not Christ-centered will soon be reduced to moralism, pharisaical self-righteousness, and futile self-effort. Such pseudo-holiness leads to bondage, rather than liberty. . .” (p. 96). Can you identify with this statement in your own life?
4. “No amount of striving or self-effort can make us holy. Only Christ can do that” (p. 97). Discuss the difference between striving or self-effort, and a Christ-centered pursuit of holiness.
5. What does 2 Corinthians 3:18 tell us about the process of being transformed into the likeness of Christ?
6. Spend some time together simply fixing your eyes on Jesus, in one or more of the following ways.
 - Read aloud one or more of the following passages that describes Him (Hebrews 1:1-3; Colossians 1:13-22; Philippians 2:5-11; Revelation 5).
 - Sing some familiar hymns or choruses that exalt Christ.

- Praise Him for who He is and for His transforming grace and power in the lives of those He has redeemed.

On Your Own

Read several chapters in one of the four gospels this week. Meditate on what “holiness in human flesh” looks like.

Grace Note

Are you frequently aware of how you fall short of the glory of God? Does it disturb you that certain sin patterns in your life require such great vigilance and constant battle? When you’re tempted to give up, meditate upon the only One who was perfect holiness in human flesh.

As you ponder the gospels, you will see frequent occasions where the disciples failed as we all do, but you will also discover a Savior who walked in perfect obedience and who has died and been raised again so that we may experience the reality of “Christ in [us], the hope of glory”!

Chapter Five: The Pathway to Holiness ("Put Off")

Getting Started

Have you ever wished for a quick and painless path to godliness? Why do you think God didn’t design the Christian life to work that way?

Going Deeper

1. Read 2 Peter 1:3–7. What does this passage tell us about God’s part in our sanctification? What does it tell us about our responsibility?
2. The apostle Paul exhorts us to “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Romans 13:14). What does it mean to “make provision for the flesh”? What are some ways you have made provision for your flesh at times? What have been the results? What does it mean to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”? What are some ways we can do that?
3. This chapter introduces the concept of the mortification of sin—the “putting off” of our old, corrupt way of life. Colossians 3:1–17 offers helpful insights into what we are to put off, as well as what we are to put on in its place. Read through this passage together, one paragraph at a time, considering the following questions:
 - vv. 1–3. What is the theme and significance of this opening paragraph? (Think about the chapter you discussed in the previous session.)

- vv. 5–11. What are we to “put to death”? Why should these things no longer be a part of the Christian’s life?
- vv. 12–17. What are we to put on? Why? How do these qualities compare and contrast with the things we are to put off?
- How are Christians described in this passage? How should that description spur us on to pursue holiness?

Giving Thanks

Did you notice the three references to “giving thanks” in Colossians 3:15–17? Why do you think this passage ends with an emphasis on thankfulness? Wrap up your time by offering up prayers (and songs, if you wish!) of thanksgiving for what you have seen in this passage.

On Your Own

“Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you” (John Owen, p. 99). Are you consciously committed to waging war against sin in your life? If so, consider these questions:

- Are there any ways you are “making provision” for your flesh? Are you involved in any activities or practices that could increase your appetite for sin? Is there any source of temptation you are holding on to? Are you in any situation that might diminish your resistance to sin? Is there anything that is dulling your spiritual sensitivity or diminishing your love for God and your desire for holiness?
- What are the “guardrails” you need to erect to keep from swerving into sin? Pick an appropriate accountability partner, confess any specific sins you need to “put off” or areas where you have been making provision for your flesh, and share your proposed “guardrails”—then check in with that person on a regular basis to let him or her know how you are doing. As you “put to death” that which is not pleasing to God, don’t forget to also consciously “put on” your new life in Christ! Select one particular virtue from Colossians 3 that you sense a need for in your life; meditate on how that virtue is perfectly manifest in Christ and ask God to make that quality real in your life by the power of His Holy Spirit.

Grace Note

No doubt we all have long lists of things we need to “put off.” Remember that you aren’t asked to make these changes on your own. No one wants to see us “put off” sin more than our heavenly Father! He has given us the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin and help us to change by His grace.

Chapter Six: The Pathway to Holiness ("Put On")

Getting Started

If appropriate, share something God showed you or has been doing in your life, as you worked through the “On Your Own” section in the last lesson.

Going Deeper

1. “Sin is a toxin that contaminates to the core of the human soul. When God saved us it was with the intent of cleansing us from every vestige of sin” (p. 120). How do these two statements differ from the way many believers actually live?

Last time, we discussed the concepts of “putting off” sin and “putting on” godliness. But sanctification isn’t just about replacing one habit with another. It’s about developing love for Christ and a taste for holiness and being filled with His Spirit. This chapter highlighted six ways to experience intimacy with God and to be transformed into the likeness of Christ—six “means of grace.”

2. Review these “means of grace” by walking through the “Making It Personal” section on pp. 134–38. Discuss how each of these areas is essential in our pursuit of holiness.

3. As you highlight these six areas, share with one another any particular points where you have recognized a lack or a need in your own life. Share any specific steps God has put on your heart for being more intentional in taking advantage of these means of grace.

Giving Thanks

It’s not often that you hear Christians praise God for the grace found in things such as confession, discipline, or suffering. But they are indeed praiseworthy because of what they produce in our lives! End this meeting by doing just that.

On Your Own

Which of these “means of grace” need intentional development in your life? List two or three steps you will take to allow God to use these means more fully in your life. Share this plan with your accountability partner. (And don’t forget to give an update about your “guardrails”!)

Grace Note

Did you look at the “means of grace” and see another To Do list? It’s really not. It’s a lavish menu of transforming grace. It’s an arsenal of resources for change. Isn’t it kind of the Lord to give us so many avenues for pursuing change?

Chapter Seven: The Heart of Holiness

Getting Started

“A commitment to holiness means having a life that is always ‘ready for company’ and open for inspection—a life that can stand up to scrutiny—not just in the obvious things, but in the hidden places where most might not think to look” (p. 142).

Does that kind of standard motivate you or discourage you? What can help us want to live this way? What can help us be able to live this way?

Going Deeper

1. What was it about the Pharisees that evoked such a strong response from the Lord Jesus?
2. How would you define hypocrisy? Why is it so abhorrent to God? Did God reveal any hypocrisy in your own life as you read this chapter? How did you respond to the questions on pp. 144–45?
3. Take time to discuss how God worked in your heart through the “Making It Personal” section in this chapter (pp. 145–54). Which points did He identify as areas of need in your life? How are you responding to His conviction?

Pray About It

Close your time by praying for one another in the specific areas of need that have been shared. Thank God for the ways His grace and His Spirit are at work in each of your lives.

Grace Note

A list of questions such as those found in this chapter can be overwhelming for some people. Remember God’s not asking us to be reformed into a better version of ourselves—He’s wanting to conform us to the image of perfection in His Son! “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:24)!

Chapter Eight: The Passion for Holiness

Epilogue: Here Comes the Bride!

Getting Started

“Conspicuous holiness ought to be the mark of the church of God” (C. H. Spurgeon, p. 155). What are some of the things our churches today are most known for? Do you think “holiness” would be high on the list of most observers?

Going Deeper

1. Review the story of how God sent revival to Romania in the 1970s. What might it look like today if “the repenters” began to repent—if God’s people took holiness seriously

and turned from everything they knew was not pleasing to Him? What kinds of changes would take place—in individual believers, in Christian homes, in our churches, in our communities, our nation, and our culture?

2. “We have accommodated to the world rather than calling the world to accommodate to Christ” (p. 160). Do you agree with that statement? If so, what evidences do you see of it being true? Why do you think it is so? What should be true instead?

3. What parallels do you see between the Jews in Nehemiah’s day and the church in our day? Why do you think we are seeing such an epidemic of sin in the church (i.e., among professing believers) today? What qualities do you see in Nehemiah’s life that are needed in believers today?

4. Share the highlights of this study and what fruit you’ve seen from reading about and discussing holiness. How has your view of God changed? What about your understanding of holiness? Of sin? How have you been growing in “putting off” and “putting on”? What about growing in the means of grace?

5. The Epilogue depicted an unimaginable scene in which a bride doesn’t care enough about her groom to get ready for the wedding! There’s another Wedding coming soon. “The bridegroom is a holy Bridegroom, and He must have a holy bride” (p. 180). Are you ready for the Wedding? If not, what would you have to do to be ready? What can you do to encourage others in the Bride to get ready for the Wedding?

Pray About It

Nehemiah was compelled by a passion for the glory of God to be displayed in His people. Among the first things Nehemiah did when he became aware of the trouble in Jerusalem was to fast and pray for the people of Israel. Let us be faithful to do the same for the Bride of Christ. Conclude your study by praying together for the church to take holiness seriously and to be ready to meet her Bridegroom as a radiant Bride, “holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27).

On Your Own

At the beginning of this study, you were asked to respond to a series of questions. How would you answer those same questions now?

1. How important is holiness to you? How much thought, attention, and effort do you devote to the pursuit of holiness? Are you intentional about putting away everything that is displeasing to God and living a holy life?

2. [if applicable] How important is your children’s holiness to you? Does their sin drive you to your knees?

3. How concerned are you about the holiness of the body of Christ? Does it grieve you when you see yourself or others treating sin lightly?

© Moody Publishers. Taken from Holiness: The Heart God Purifies by Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth. Holiness: The Heart God Purifies is [available in our store](#). Used with permission. www.ReviveOurHearts.com