



YOUTH STUDY

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LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1

Holy Living: A Youth Lenten Study

Be Holy

Introduction to Study

What does it mean to be holy? According to Scripture, we are to be holy. First Peter states “be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:15–16). We find it again in Ephesians when we read that God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy” (Eph. 1:4). Then in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, we read “let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy” (Rev. 22:11).

The command to be holy echoes throughout Scripture and is a challenge to live our lives differently than the way most of the world lives. Over and over we read passages in which God says to repent or stop doing wrong and reorient our lives in a new direction where God’s love is made real.

In brief, God wants us to be holy in order to love others. As the second part of the Great Commandment says in Matthew 22:35–40, we are to love our neighbor as ourself. Being holy is not a set of rules but rather a way of being that often displays values very different from what is culturally deemed cool. Being holy involves things like loving your enemy, befriending unpopular classmates, and giving to those in need instead of hoarding what we can get. This study is written to help

Session at a Glance

ARRIVING

- Finding something holy

GATHERING

- Sharing something holy

OPENING

- Opening with a litany
- Listing definitions
- Beginning to define holy

EXPLORING

- Exploring holiness in Jesus’ words

RESPONDING

- Describing unholiness
- Responding to the unholy

CLOSING

- Prayer

youth come to a broader and more helpful understanding of our scriptural invitation to be holy.

Rodger Nishioka, a leading scholar on faith development for youth and young adults, reminds us of three things all youth are searching for as they transition from childhood to adulthood: identity, belonging, and purpose.¹ Youth want to know who they are, where they belong, and why they are here. Inherent within our calling to “be holy” is our invitation to discover our identity, belonging, and purpose. It is not about reaching a destination of perfection; rather, it is a journey in which we find ourselves in closer communion with God and each other.

This study seeks to guide youth through a Lenten journey where youth will explore what it means to be holy and how they might discover a sense of identity, belonging, and purpose along the way.

In session 1, we will define what holiness is and what it means today. In session 2, we will look at what makes us holy. In sessions 3–5, we will look at what it means to be set apart, from, with, and for. Session 6 offers youth the opportunity to commit to a life of holiness and encourages them in their ongoing holy journey.

Introduction for the Leader

The word *holy* can be more than a little confusing for both youth and adults. When asked to define the word *holy*, people often use synonyms such as excellent, faultless, complete, whole, or perfect. While these words might play a small part in the definition of what holy means, it is very misleading to begin there. None of them fully explain or define what holy is.

Adding to the confusion, the word *holy* appears in many words, such as *holiness*, *holies*, and *holy-minded*. It shares its root with words like *consecrate* (to make holy), *sanctify* (to become holy), and *saints* (the holy ones).

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that holy is not a description we give to God. Holy is a description that God gives to God.² This is God’s term. God is the first one to use it. This means the best way to understand holiness is to look to God. Holiness is wrapped up in who God is. So when God invites us to be holy, we are invited to be “set apart” like God from all that is unholy, with all who are holy, and for a holy purpose.³

Our call to be holy is related to God and how we reflect God’s holiness to others. In future sessions, we will dive more into the various aspects of being set

apart, but in this first lesson, we want youth to explore the basics:

- To be holy is to be set apart—just as God is set apart.
- To be holy is to be set apart *from* all that is not holy.
- To be holy is to be set apart *with* all who are holy.
- To be holy is to be set apart *for* all that is holy

We also want the youth to begin to think about accepting their invitation to be holy as a journey. This is why the church season of Lent is perfect for this study. Lent is a forty-day journey designed to help us stop, pause, and reflect. Lent is a season of spiritual intentionality, and in this season of Lent, youth will spend time looking at life through the lens of holiness. Enjoy this holy journey and blessings as you begin!

Goal for the Session

Explore what the term *holy* means and how it impacts daily living.

Preparing for the Session

- Think about how your room is set up. To be holy is to be set apart. Is there some way in which you could set apart your physical space for this study over the next six weeks? Some possibilities include lighting the same candle each week, rearranging the furniture into a circle, or meeting in a different room than normal.
- Read through the Participant’s Handout and decide how you will use it based on your group size and your available time.
- Write the words from activity 4 on the board in letters large enough for everyone to read before they arrive (*weird, different, odd, bizarre, wacky, strange, peculiar, distinctive, unusual, and quirky*).
- If using media, it is always a good idea to do a test run before the session starts. In Teaching Alternatives, there is an exercise that requires a computer, internet access, and speakers.

Materials Needed

- Bibles
- Board
- Markers
- Copies of the Participant Handout

Teaching Tip

This is the first of a six-session series on what it means to be holy. Give the youth plenty of time to explore their own understandings of what it means to them and how they have heard the word used before. Encourage them to ask questions as you go along or to think about some follow-up questions at home that the group can explore the next time you gather. It is more helpful to give them a safe space to discuss the topic on their terms than it is to finish all the activities listed.

Arriving (5 minutes)

1. Finding Something Holy

As youth arrive, invite them to find something that they would describe as holy within the room. If possible and if there is time, invite them to go beyond the meeting room and into the sanctuary, or nature, or some other large space.

Ask each youth to bring a holy object back with them as you gather, and ask them to think about why they selected what they did and why they would describe it as holy.

Gathering (5 minutes)

2. Sharing something holy

Invite youth to describe or show the object to the group and explain why they consider it holy. After each youth talks, repeat a summary of the various rationale each offers for what is holy (e.g. “we have it in the sanctuary,” “it reminds me of God,” “it seems churchy,” etc.).

Opening (15 minutes)

3. Opening with a Litany

Invite a volunteer to open with the litany that is printed in the Participant Handout.

4. Listing Definitions

Call attention to the words on the board that you posted before the session. Read them aloud: *weird, different, odd, bizarre, wacky, strange, peculiar, distinctive, unusual, and quirky*.

Encourage the youth to read the list together and then ask them what makes the words similar and what makes these words dissimilar.

In order to help get the conversation going, you might suggest: “All these words assume that there is

some standard for normal, and each of these words have a different nuanced way to describe something as being outside the bounds of what the majority might call normal. What would you describe as bizarre but not unusual?”

5. Beginning to Define Holy

Add one more word to the board. Write *holy* somewhere in the middle of your list and ask the youth what makes it similar or dissimilar to the rest of the list.

Remind them that there are no correct answers; you are just trying to get their opinion on what the word *holy* means because it can be a very tricky word for both youth and adults to understand.

Exploring (15 minutes)

6. Exploring Holiness in Jesus' Words

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 7:1–12, a passage from the end of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Before the reading, ask participants to think about how this passage might illustrate how Jesus understood the word *holy*.

After the volunteer reads the passage, ask the group how they think the things Jesus lists (hypocrisy, waste, searching, the golden rule) relate to the word *holy*.

Now ask the group to think about how doing these holy things would be like being set apart in multiple ways.

- How might we be set apart *from* judging others?
- How might we be set apart *for* giving bread?
- How might we be set apart *with* our neighbor?

Responding (15 minutes)

7. Describing Unholiness

Ask the youth to help you brainstorm things that are unholy. Invite someone to list the examples on the board as they are being called out. Give them some broad categories (e.g. abuse, violence, racism, wealth, climate change, bullying, sexism, fraud) and ask them to come up with concrete examples of unholy, bad things related to each category, either in their personal experience or in current events.

Some youth might disagree with what someone else brings up as an example, but try to encourage them to look at what all the examples, taken together, begin to represent.

8. Responding to the Unholy

Invite youth to imagine how they might respond to each of these unholy things now listed on the board. How can they respond? What can they do to fix them? Encourage them to be creative with this and to not be limited by what they might see in themselves as a lack of money or power or influence. Encourage them to dream big!

Before you close, ask the youth if they have any further reflections on how these responses to the unholy things might help us clarify what being holy is in terms of being set apart (e.g., set apart *from* all that, set apart *with* each other, set apart *for* doing good in this world).

Closing (5 minutes)

9. Prayer

Close your time in prayer, either with the prayer below or using your own words.

Holy God, thank you for inviting us into your holiness. Help us to walk more closely and intentionally with you in this Lenten season as we contemplate what it means to be set part in a particular way—to be holy. Open us to your path and to your love. Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

- Invite the youth to look in the concordance to find even more Bible verses that contain the word *holy* to help them develop a deeper sense of the term in the Exploring section of this session.
- Brainstorm a list of ways they have heard the term *holy* used before and discuss how each expression helps or diminishes our understanding of what *holy* means (e.g. holy cow, holy guacamole, holy crap). There is also a long list of sayings from the 1960s Batman and Robin television show in which Robin famously and repeatedly said “holy [fill in the blank] Batman” in many creative ways. The website to read and listen to all these is found at <http://holysmokesbatman.com/>.
- Play the game “human knot.” Have all participants get in a tight circle and stick their arms straight out in front of them. Grab hands with two

different people in the circle. (They have to be two different people, or it won’t work out.) Then have them twist and move and step over one another to try and realign themselves in a circle completely untangled. (If your group has already done this several times and is really good at it, make them try it with all or half of the participants blindfolded.) Once the group has untangled and while they are still standing in a circle holding hands, share this: “We will be going on a holy adventure together this Lenten season. For the next few weeks, we will be looking at what it means to be holy as we travel toward Holy Week. To be holy is to be set apart *from* all that is not holy. To be holy is to be set apart *for* all that is holy. To be holy is to be set apart *with* all who are holy. I’m glad that you will each be *with* me as we journey ahead.”

Key Scripture

- Matthew 7:1–12

For More Information

Brian Christopher Coulter, *Be Holy: Find Identity/Find Belonging/Find Purpose* (Nashville: Chalice Press, 2014).

Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

Notes

1. Rodger Nishioka, *The Roots of Who We Are* (Louisville, KY: Bridge Resources, 1997).
2. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 288–93.
3. F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (London: Bagster, 1976).

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Holy Living: A Youth Lenten Study

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Holy Moly

Holiness is a word you probably don't use every day. Yet it is used in many texts in the Bible. Many of us shy away from talking about ourselves as holy because we don't want to give the impression that we think we are better than anyone else. In this Lenten study, we'll find out just what that word means and how it is used in the Bible. You may be surprised at what you find!

Opening Litany

Holy God, Holy One, Holy Three,
your holiness sets you apart,
yet in your holy wisdom,
you invite us to join you on this holy journey.

You call us.
You invite us.
You equip us.
You enable us.

As we enter this time,
refine us yet again
so that we might be set apart too,
that we might be a better reflection of you,
that we might be holy. Amen.

Holiness Is

Holiness is being:

- set apart *from*,
- set apart *for*, and
- set apart *with*.

Some Scriptures with the Word *Holy*

You shall be holy to me. (Lev. 20:26a)
For you are a people holy to the LORD your God.
(Deut. 7:6)
So as to present you holy and blameless (Col.
1:22)
In holiness (1 Thess. 4:7)

Reflection Questions

- What does being holy mean to you?

- In what ways have you been set apart?

- Are you holy? Why or why not?
