

It Is Not Difficult to Be a Saint

Leviticus 19:1-2 • Matthew 5:43-48 • 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers, from the texts themselves, that holiness is not a specialty for professionals but God's stated will for every baptized person, and that the saints of Carmel took that call literally.

Catholic Touchstone. The universal call to holiness (Lumen Gentium 39-42; CCC 2013-2014): every disciple, in every state of life, is called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity, which can ripen into real union with God.

What You Need to Know

This study reads Scripture through the eyes of two Doctors of the Church, St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and St. John of the Cross (1542-1591), Carmelite reformers, mystics, and spiritual masters. It is still an inductive Bible study: every session opens the text first and lets the group find what is there. The Carmelites are our guides, not our subject. Their teaching is received because the Church has recognized it as a faithful witness to Scripture and the Catholic tradition; what makes them such trustworthy guides is how ruthlessly they submitted their experience of prayer to the word of God.

Why begin with holiness rather than with prayer techniques? Because both saints do. St. Teresa wrote first for her own sisters, women who assumed the heights of prayer were for someone else, and her counsel has served the whole Church since; St. John insisted that God offers union to all, and that so few arrive not because God is stingy but because few are willing to be led. Their starting point is the claim of this session: sanctity is God's will for you, stated in plain words in both Testaments.

Hold one modern story lightly in reserve until the Thread Watch: in Krakow in 1935, an introverted tailor named Jan Tyranowski heard a priest say in a sermon, in substance, that it is not difficult to become a saint. He believed it, reorganized his entire hidden life around prayer, and within a decade God used him to shape the young man who became Pope St. John Paul II. Do not tell the full story yet; plant only the sentence from the sermon at the end of the session. The full story, with its sources, is told in Session 11.

Expect two reactions in the room tonight: some will find the call to holiness exciting, and some will quietly hear it as pressure, one more standard they are failing. Name that second reaction gently when it surfaces. The whole arc of this study is that holiness is first God's work of love in us, not our performance for him; Sessions 5 and 6 will meet the strugglers where they are.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Leviticus 19:2 gives the command at the root of tonight's Gospel text: "You shall be holy; for I the LORD your God am holy." Holiness in Leviticus is not first a moral score; it is belonging to God, being set apart for him, and then living like the God you belong to.

Jesus takes up that command in the Sermon on the Mount and radicalizes it: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). The perfection in context (5:43-47) is a perfection of love, love that does not stop at friends. St. Paul then applies it to ordinary church members in Thessalonica: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

The line from Leviticus through Matthew to 1 Thessalonians is the line this whole study walks: God's holiness, offered for our participation, with love as its measure. Hebrews 12:14 states the stakes: holiness is that "without which no one will see the Lord."

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John of the Cross

St. John opens his first great work with a grief, not a technique. He teaches, in substance, that many souls remain at the beginnings of the spiritual life not because God withholds anything, but because they do not understand the road, or lack guides, or shrink back when God begins to lead them beyond what is comfortable. God, he insists, desires to bring souls on to deep union with himself. The tragedy he writes to prevent is not ambition; it is settling.

Summarized from the prologue to The Ascent of Mount Carmel.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Teresa of Avila

Teresa tells her sisters that those who set out on the road of prayer must travel it with what she calls "a very determined determination": a resolve to keep going and never stop until they reach the end, come what may, whatever the labor, whoever complains, whether they reach the end or die on the road. She is not describing grim willpower; she is describing what a person does when they actually believe the destination is real.

The Way of Perfection, ch. 21.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. John Paul II

Writing to the whole Church at the close of the Jubilee year 2000, St. John Paul II asked that all pastoral planning be set "in the perspective of holiness," and called holiness "the high standard of ordinary Christian living." Not the heroic exception to ordinary life: the standard of it. He learned that conviction young, and from a layman, as this study will tell.

Novo Millennio Ineunte 30-31.

Catechism Connection

CCC 2013 grounds the session: "all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (quoting Lumen Gentium 40). Note whom the paragraph addresses: all. Not clergy, not religious, not the naturally devout.

CCC 2014 goes further and names where this study is headed: spiritual progress tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ, a union the Church calls mystical, and God calls us all to it, even if special graces are given only to some. That sentence is the charter for reading John and Teresa as guides for ordinary parishioners rather than curiosities.

CCC 2015 adds the honest cost clause that Sessions 2 and 5 will open: there is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Thread A, "The Tailor's Apprentice," is planted tonight. At the very end of the session, after the closing prayer, tell the group only this: in 1935, in Krakow, a tailor heard a sermon claiming that it is not difficult to become a saint, and he staked his life on it. Say you will tell them what came of it later in the study. Do not name Tyranowski or St. John Paul II yet.

The sealed guess goes home tonight on Take-Home 1: "When God feels absent in your prayer, what do you think is actually happening?" Collect nothing; they keep the sheet sealed and bring it weekly. It opens at Session 6.

Thread B, "Water to Flame," is not planted until Session 5. Do not preview it.

Session Goals

1. Establish the group covenant for an inductive study: the text first, honest questions welcome, confidences kept.
2. Discover from Leviticus 19, Matthew 5, and 1 Thessalonians 4 that holiness is commanded of all God's people and defined by love.
3. Meet St. Teresa and St. John as trustworthy guides commissioned by the Church (both Doctors of the Church).
4. Send everyone home with the sealed-guess question and one concrete practice of prayer.

Time note (75-90 min). Win 10 min; Build 45-55 min; Send and Live It 15 min. If short on time, cut Q5 and shorten the second Dig Deeper conversation; do not cut the steelman or the sealed-guess launch.

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Leviticus 19:1-2 · Matthew 5:43-48 · 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Opening Prayer

Father, you are holy, and you have called each of us by name to belong to you. Open the Scriptures to us tonight, and open us to the Scriptures. Give us honest hearts, generous courage, and the determined determination of your saints. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN

W1. When you hear the word "saint," what image comes to mind first? Where do you think that image came from?

W2. Have you ever met someone whose holiness was quiet, ordinary, easy to miss? What made you notice it anyway?

BUILD

Q1. Read Leviticus 19:1-2 aloud. To whom is this command addressed? What surprises you about that?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The command is addressed to "all the congregation of the sons of Israel," not to priests or prophets. From the very beginning, holiness is the vocation of the whole people, because it flows from belonging: "for I the LORD your God am holy." Israel is to be holy because of whose Israel is. Set apart first, then living set apart.

DISCOVERY MOMENT · Q2

Read Matthew 5:43-48 together and stop at verse 48. Jesus is echoing and transforming an Old Testament command here. Without looking at tonight's handouts, have the group hunt for the Old Testament verse behind "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Give them a hint only if needed: it is in the Torah, in a chapter about how God's people live.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The root is Leviticus 19:2, which the group just read: be holy because your God is holy. Jesus deepens "holy" to "perfect" (Greek *teleios*, complete, brought to its intended end), and the surrounding verses show what he means: a love that does not stop at those who love you back. Perfection in Matthew 5 is completed love, not flawless performance.

Q3. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8. Paul writes to a young congregation of ordinary converts. According to verse 3, what is God's will for them? How does Paul ground it in verses 7-8?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (4:3). No discernment mystery, no fine print: sanctification, being made holy, is God's explicit will for every believer in the room. Paul grounds it in the call itself (v. 7, God called us in holiness) and raises the stakes in v. 8: to disregard this is to disregard not man but God, "who gives his Holy Spirit to you." Notice that God wills it and God supplies the Spirit to

accomplish it; the command comes with the power.

BUILD, THEN PRESS: ARE WE NOT ALREADY SAINTS?

Present this objection at full strength before answering it. A thoughtful Protestant friend says: "The New Testament calls all believers saints, right now (Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2). We are already sanctified in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:11). This Catholic talk of growing in holiness, climbing toward union, degrees of prayer, quietly turns a finished gift into a lifelong performance. It puts the burden back on me that Christ already carried. Is that not exactly the works-righteousness Paul condemns?"

Let the group feel the force of this. It is strong precisely because everything it affirms is true.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Affirm the truth in it first: yes, Scripture calls believers saints and says they have been sanctified; holiness begins as pure gift in baptism, not as our project. But the same Paul who says "you were sanctified" also says "this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thessalonians 4:3) and "strive... for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14 makes the same point). Gift and growth are not rivals in Paul; the gift is a seed meant to grow. Philippians 2:12-13 holds both in one breath: work out your own salvation, "for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." The Catholic teaching is not that we climb to God by effort; it is that God's grace really transforms us, and transformation takes a lifetime of consent. That is also exactly how John and Teresa talk: for both of them, the further you go, the more God does and the less you do.

DIG DEEPER: TELEIOS, BROUGHT TO COMPLETION

The word translated "perfect" in Matthew 5:48 is the Greek *teleios*, from *telos*, an end or goal: not "flawless" but "brought to its intended completion," the way a fruit tree is *teleios* when it finally bears fruit. Being perfect as the Father is perfect means letting love reach its full growth in you. Ask: how does hearing "complete" instead of "flawless" change the feel of the command?

Q4. Look back across all three passages. What is the measure of holiness in each one? Is it primarily rule-keeping, feelings, or something else?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

In Leviticus 19, holiness immediately unfolds into love of neighbor (the same chapter contains "you shall love your neighbor as yourself," 19:18). In Matthew 5, perfection is love of enemies. In 1 Thessalonians 4, sanctification governs the body and protects the brother. Across all three, holiness is embodied in love and concrete bodily conduct, and Paul turns explicitly to brotherly love in the very next verses (4:9-10). This matters for the whole study: when the Carmelites talk about the heights of prayer, the summit they mean is not visions or feelings. It is charity. We will end the entire study on this note in Session 12.

Q5. Be honest: when you hear that God wills your sanctification, does it land as good news or as pressure? Why?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Let this be a real conversation; do not rush to fix it. Surface both responses. Then offer the reframe the saints will spend eleven more sessions unpacking: God willing your holiness means God is committed to it. The primary worker in your sanctification is God (Philippians 2:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, "he who calls you is faithful, and he will do it"). Our part is real but responsive: consent, cooperation, showing up.

If tonight's command felt crushing, that can be a sign we imagined ourselves as the primary worker, though weariness, scrupulosity, and honest confusion about grace each deserve their own gentle hearing.

SEND

S1. If you took 1 Thessalonians 4:3 personally, "this is the will of God, your sanctification," what is one place in your ordinary week where that will of God is waiting for your consent?

S2. Who in your life needs to hear that holiness is for them too, not just for professionals? What would you actually say?

Live It This Week

- Pray five minutes a day this week, at the same time each day if you can. No method required yet: just show up, read the memory verse slowly, and tell God honestly that you want what he wants for you.
- Once this week, when someone irritates you, silently pray for them by name before you respond. That is Matthew 5:44 in street clothes.
- Write your sealed guess on the Take-Home sheet tonight, fold it, and bring it back every week.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you have called us to be holy as your Father is holy, and you have promised the Spirit to accomplish in us what you command. We give you our consent tonight, small as it is. Make it grow. We ask this in your holy name. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE · 1 THESSALONIANS 4:3

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification."

SESSION 1 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

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Every passage used, in order

Passage	Where it is used
Lev 19:1-2	Build Q1: holiness commanded of the whole congregation
Lev 19:18	Q4 answer: holiness unfolds into love of neighbor
Matt 5:43-48	Discovery moment: perfection as completed love
1 Thess 4:1-8	Q2: sanctification is God's will; the Spirit is given
Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 1 Cor 6:11	Steelman: believers called saints and sanctified now
Heb 12:14	Steelman answer: holiness without which no one sees the Lord
Phil 2:12-13	Steelman answer: God at work in you
1 Thess 5:23-24	Q5 answer: he who calls you is faithful
Matt 5:44	Live It: pray for the one who irritates you