

# unholiness

GROUP LEADER'S GUIDE

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This guide is based on *Unholiness: Overcoming the Forces That Attack Your Soul* by Christopher Bounds and Jim Lo (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2015).

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# contents

About This Guide	4
Week 1. Holy and Unholy: The Problem of Evil	5
Week 2. The Flesh: Physical Corruption	7
Week 3. The Flesh's Implications of Our Problem	10
Week 4. The World: Our Spiritual Problem Is Communal	13
Week 5. The World's Solution Is the Church	16
Week 6. The Devil: Our Archenemy	18
Week 7. The Devil's Evil Minions	21
Week 8. Winning the War	23

## about this guide

This study is based on the book, *Unholiness*, by Christopher Bounds and Jim Lo. The study takes a serious look at the harm sin causes by putting us in violation of God's law, by creating enmity between us and God, and by rendering us powerless to live as God wants us to live. However, it also addresses what it means to be saved from sin and how to win the war that the Devil wages against us. Expect to learn and grow with your group as you interact with God's truth in the next eight sessions.

## week 1

# holy and unholy

## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

### to the facilitator

Welcome everyone to this first session, and ask each person to state his or her name and an interesting personal fact. Inform the group that each session will be informal, and you want everyone to feel comfortable about making comments and asking questions.

### focus on God's Word

Two facts seem irreconcilable. The Bible presents God as thoroughly good and glorious, but it also presents human nature as evil. Nature—creation—is both beautiful and terrifying. A gentle stream can become a destructive torrent. A peaceful day can become terrifying as a tornado rips through the sky. Human beings often lie, steal, cheat, murder, and wage war. So the authors of *Unholiness* comment on page 18: “On an experiential level, when we see the effects of evil and sin in the world, especially upon the innocent and vulnerable, or when we feel abandoned by God in the midst of tragedy, our souls cry out, ‘Why, God? If you’re a loving God and have control over all existence, why do we suffer?’ Platitudes such as ‘Trust God,’ ‘God has a reason for it,’ or ‘God will bring good out of it’ offer little comfort. We suffer in doubt and fear from what we can’t understand.”

God created the world out of nothing and made it subject to change. Further, he created it as an act of generosity. He imparted life to the creation, including Adam and Eve in whom he placed his image. As God’s image-bearers, Adam and Eve were able to reflect his moral purity and love, and experience social relationships. They were at harmony with the Creator, each other, and the world around them. Also, God appointed them to exercise dominion over the creation.

Although Adam and Eve were created in God's image, they were capable of sinning. When the serpent tempted Eve to disobey God's command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, she chose to violate God's will, and fell into sin. She offered the forbidden fruit to Adam and he ate of it too. On page 31 of *Unholiness* we read: "After the fall, the image of God in humanity was left in devastation. Genesis 3–11 paints an ugly picture of its impact. It reversed the original conditions of human life. Morally, humanity became completely dead to God, self-focused, and helpless to change. Naturally, human reason, understanding, and free will became marred, and human affections became inordinate and undisciplined. Politically, humanity's relationship to the world and ability to organize socially was seriously defaced. The natural, moral, and political image of God was replaced with the image of the Devil, defined by pride and self-will."

Sin corrupts humanity and creation, but God has always planned to restore both. Even before creating all things, the cross was central to this plan.

### **focus on life**

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How would you respond if someone said, "If God cared about all the evil in the world, he would end it immediately"?
2. What signs of corruption do you see in nature?
3. Why do you agree or disagree that Adam and Eve loved the creation more than the Creator?
4. Why is creation not a perfect revelation of God's character?
5. How has sin marred God's image in us?
6. How has sin affected the human race socially? Politically?
7. What does it mean to be "dead in your transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1)?
8. Why do you agree that God created the angels with free will?
9. Why do you agree or disagree that human beings still have a divine mandate to exercise dominion over creation?
10. How would you answer someone who asked, "If God knew human beings would sin, why did he create us?"
11. How has sin damaged our community? What, if anything, can we do about this situation?

### **wrap-up**

Challenge the group to consider how news events in the coming week point to the unholiness of the human race. Ask them to come to the next session prepared to report their observations.

## week 2

# the flesh

## PHYSICAL CORRUPTION

### to the facilitator

Welcome everyone to this session and ask volunteers to report their observations about the effects of unholiness on the human race. Explain that this session focuses on the nature of personhood.

### focus on God's Word

Gnostics were heretics in the early church who took a very low view of the physical universe and the human body. They believed all matter is evil and destined for destruction in the life to come. According to their philosophy, only the spiritual will exist in eternity, and salvation is deliverance from the body and transition into the spiritual world. The authors of *Unholiness* believe a form of Gnosticism pervades many Christian thinking today, because they fail to see human nature as unified and whole. They fail to understand that our bodies and souls are interconnected.

Monists claim the human being is only body. What we call “spiritual” monists describe as simply the physical, biochemical, and neurological processes of the body. However, Jesus clearly distinguished between body and soul (see Matt. 10:28; Luke 12:20).

But is the human being composed of two parts or three? Dichotomists say two parts: body and soul. They teach that the soul survives the death of the body and survives in a conscious state until it is reunited with the body when the body is resurrected at Jesus' second coming. Trichotomists view human nature as consisting of three parts: body, soul, and spirit. They say the soul governs our rational, social, and emotional functions, whereas the spirit gives us our spiritual senses and connects us to God. Through Adam and Eve's fall, our spirit became dead—cut off from God—and is made alive only by the new birth (see John 3:5–7; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:3).

Authors Bounds and Lo stress the necessity of the bodily resurrection to make us fully human. They state on page 36 of *Unholiness*:

Make no mistake: although the New Testament indicates a conscious existence for humanity in the intermediate state and our “rest” with Christ in death, as long as the soul is separated from the body, we are less than truly human. All traditional Christian liturgies at funerals point to our ultimate hope: bodily resurrection from the dead at Christ’s second coming. Only then will bodily corruption as a consequence of human sin be overcome. If we remain in the state of bodily death, sin and evil have the final word in our lives. This is the apostle Paul’s point when he declared, “For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost” (1 Cor. 15:16–18).

The authors also distinguish between human nature and personhood, although the two are inseparably one and affect each other. They say human nature is what we have and personhood is what we are. Sin has corrupted both our nature and our personhood. The New Testament identifies this corruption of God’s image in us as the flesh and the sinful nature, our worldly condition, and the law of sin.

Because the flesh reigns as king until Christ sets us free, we do not love God and others as we should. We have an inclination to rebel, to be disobedient, and to be selfish. We do not want to do God’s will; nor do we see life from God’s perspective, and we do not have the power to please God.

On page 48 of *Unholiness*, Bounds and Lo offer sound counsel about negating the power of the flesh: “Redemption . . . demands a renovation of the natural image. We need to have knowledge, wisdom, and understanding from God so we can discern clearly what the love of God and neighbor requires in relationship. More importantly, however, we need Christ to crush our rebellious will and the Holy Spirit to fortify our will so we can walk in holy love, bringing victory over intentional, habitual, and surprise sins.”

## focus on life

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Which view of human beings do you hold: monism, dichotomy, or trichotomy? Why do you hold that view?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that a form of Gnosticism exists among Christians today?
3. How do you distinguish between the body and the flesh, as Bounds and Lo describe the flesh?
4. Are Christians powerless to conquer the dictates of the sinful nature? Why or why not?
5. How did God’s image become marred in human beings?
6. What evidence of corrupted human nature do you see in social relationships?
7. How has the flesh corrupted the mind?
8. What does it mean to be born again?
9. How can God’s image in human beings be restored?

10. Why do you agree or disagree that no one will be a complete human being until the resurrection?
11. Why do you agree or disagree that an unbeliever can do nothing that pleases God?
12. How should we distinguish between human nature and personhood?

### **wrap-up**

Challenge the group members to show by their words and deeds that they are new persons in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

## week 3

# the flesh's implications of our problem

### to the facilitator

Ask the group whether every sin is the same to God. Indicate that this session addresses that question and may bring a few surprises.

### focus on God's Word

In *Unholiness*, Bounds and Lo insist evangelicalism generally considers all sin the same in God's eyes, but this idea has serious consequences when dealing with the problems of the flesh.

Roman Catholic theology teaches that sins are either venial or mortal. Venial sins are said to be light and of no consequence to a person's relationship with God. Mortal sins are serious and lead to spiritual death unless they are dealt with appropriately.

Is all sin the same in God's sight? According to the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition's "Westminster Larger Catechism": "All transgressions of the law are not equally heinous; but some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others" (see *Unholiness*, p. 51).

The Bible shows that God considers some sins more grievous than others. Unintentional sins could be atoned for, whereas intentional sins carried the death penalty. Romans 6:23 supplies a warning to Christians: intentional sinning (transgressing God's law) leads to death.

Reinforcing their case, the authors of *Unholiness* write on page 54:

The writer of Hebrews picked up the teaching found in the Old Testament's holiness code in 10:26–27. The main thrust of the letter is an exhortation for the church to persevere in

their faith, lest they fall and not make it to the Promised Land (Heb. 5:11—6:12). While Christ is a greater priest, who makes a superior sacrifice for sin in a better sanctuary than the temple (7:1—10:18), Christians are warned, if they continue in intentional sin, there is no sacrifice that can atone for their sin—not even the blood of Jesus. Again, God makes a clear distinction between intentional and unintentional sin. Intentional sin is far more serious and spiritually dangerous than the other.

When God gave Ezekiel a tour beginning at the outskirts of Jerusalem and ending at the center of the temple, he evaluated the sins he showed to Ezekiel. He judged each abomination to be worse than the preceding one (Ezek. 8:7–17).

The following New Testament Scriptures show how God evaluated specific sins differently: Matthew 12:22–32; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5; 9:24—10:13; 1 Timothy 1:18–20; 1 John 5:16–17. The authors of *Unholiness* state: “Sin isn’t just legal; it has relational and purity concerns attached to it. We must view sin in the light of its impact on people’s relationships with God, each other, and creation, as well as the degree to which it defiles and corrupts people” (p. 56).

Jesus identified Judas’s sin of betraying him as greater than Pilate’s sin (John 19:11). Apparently, what made Judas’s sin greater was the fact that he had been with Jesus so long and had pretended to be his follower.

Degrees of punishment for sins also show that God considers some sins worse than others. Jesus told his disciples that a home or town that rejected their message would receive greater punishment than Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt. 10:14–15). Also, he said the servant who knew his master’s will but disobeyed would receive greater punishment than the servant who was ignorant of his master’s will (Luke 12:47–48).

On page 65 of *Unholiness*, Bounds and Lo offer the following perspective: “These types of passages and others have led many theologians and Christian traditions to believe in ‘levels and degrees of hell.’ Issues like stewardship, motivation, and opportunity will play a part in the condemnation assigned to a person. So while all sin apart from the atoning work of Christ leads to death, there may be levels and degrees of hell.”

## focus on life

Discuss the following with your group.

1. What is your opinion of Roman Catholicism’s classification of sins as venial or mortal?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that a so-called little white lie is not as evil as an intentional big lie?
3. Why do you agree or disagree that all sins are equally grievous to God?
4. Is watching an X-rated movie as evil as committing adultery? Why or why not?
5. Why do you agree or disagree that the blood of Christ cannot atone for Christians who continue in intentional sins?
6. Do you think there are degrees of punishment in hell? Explain your thinking.

7. Do you think a church treasurer who embezzles will face more severe punishment than a company treasurer who embezzles? Why or why not?

8. Do you think lying to a child is worse than lying to an adult? Why or why not?

9. Why do you agree or disagree that Romans 6:23 holds a warning for Christians?

10. Do you think a repeat criminal offender should be punished more severely than a first-time offender? Why or why not?

11. In your opinion, what are the three most grievous sins in contemporary culture? Defend your answer.

12. Why do you agree or disagree that people who hear the gospel but reject it deserve greater punishment than those who have never heard it?

### **wrap-up**

Challenge your group members to write a letter this week that addresses the heinous nature of a social sin and warns of punishment. Caution the members to be courteous and persuasive.

## week 4

# the world

## OUR SPIRITUAL PROBLEM IS COMMUNAL

### to the facilitator

The apostle John commanded, “Do not love the world or anything in the world” (1 John 2:15). Tell the group that this command does not prohibit us from enjoying or appreciating the beauty of nature. This session makes clear what it means to not love the world.

### focus on God’s Word

The word *world* can describe the created order. It can also describe all the people who live in the world. Obviously, the apostle John did not advise us to withdraw from creation or those who populate our planet. Isolation diametrically opposes Jesus’ command, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15). The word *world* in 1 John 2:15 refers to fallen humanity under the Devil’s rule.

Marshaled under the Devil, the world hates believers. Our lifestyle exposes and judges unbelievers’ sin. The Spirit of God in believers and the spirit of the world oppose each other, and there can be no fellowship between those who are in Christ and those who serve the Devil. One is light; the other is darkness. The apostle Paul said the world was crucified to him and he was crucified to the world.

God created the physical world as good, but it became cursed when Adam and Eve sinned. Hostility exists between humanity and the serpent because of sin. Further, the fall had a disastrous effect on human relationships. Adam and Eve’s bodies became mortal; their son Cain killed their son Abel; and humanity descended into such putrefying evil that God destroyed the world with a flood, saving only Noah and his family. But the descendants of Noah proved to be no better. They

rebelled against God's command to fill the earth by congregating to building a tower to honor themselves and worship the host of heaven.

In *Unholiness*, Bounds and Lo comment:

While God did not allow the construction of this city to be finished [Gen. 11:6–9], fallen humanity has been trying ever since to complete what began at Babel. The Old and New Testaments pick up humanity in revolt against God in the imagery of a city or nation. Ezekiel spoke of an apocalyptic leader, Gog, from the land of Magog, and his allied nations who are archetypal enemies of God seeking to destroy God and the friends of God (Ezek. 38–39). The Gospels speak of the kingdom made up of the children of humanity who in the end will have no place in God's coming reign (Matt. 8:12). They also mention the kingdom of Satan set in opposition to Christ and his kingdom (Matt. 12:26; Luke 11:18); and John addressed the quintessential human city, Babylon, in his apocalyptic vision. Here, Babylon represents every type of human evil and contrasts sharply with the city of God, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 17–18)." (p. 74)

The world beckons us to abandon our love for God and replace it with love for the created order, corrupt social relationships, and false hope in worldly institutions. We must resist the call of the world and love God supremely, relate to others in genuine love, and cooperate with fellow believers in serving God. Bounds and Lo point out on page 80 of *Unholiness* that "materialism, consumerism, hedonism, and atheism are what the world uses to ensnare us." They identify the prosperity gospel as evidence that the world's fixation on the created order has slipped into the church. The world's fixation on sex has also led us to believe we cannot be fully human without a robust sex life.

Gnosticism has also slipped into the thinking of many Christians. This philosophy leads to an unhealthy view of the created order. Thinking that it is all going to burn in the end causes many to devalue both the body and the created order as components of God's plan for everlasting life. True Christian thought anticipates the resurrection and the restoration of nature. It also causes us to see the environment as something to be protected and cared for.

## focus on life

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How do you distinguish the uses of the word *world* in the New Testament?
2. How might some Christians try to isolate themselves from the world?
3. Why do you agree or disagree that Christians can build relationships with unbelievers while insulating themselves from the evil that is in the world?
4. Do you agree or disagree that our modern times resemble the days of Noah? Why or why not?
5. How are humanism and hedonism worldly philosophies?
6. Do you think it is possible to strongly desire to be rich and holy? Why or why not?

7. How does active participation in the fellowship of a church help to combat worldliness?

8. Why do you agree or disagree that contemporary culture has infiltrated the church?

9. Can the church draw more people to God by adopting the character of contemporary culture?

Why or why not?

10. What false promises might a church extend to unbelievers in an effort to draw them to God?

11. How might a Christian pay too much attention to his or her body or pay too little attention to it?

12. What conflicts between the spirit of the world and the Spirit of God have you experienced?

### **wrap-up**

Have volunteers complete the following sentence: “Because Jesus has saved me out of the world . . .”

## week 5

# the world's solution is the church

### to the facilitator

History is both a story of bad news and good news. Tell the group the bad news is humanity has been in rebellion against God almost from the beginning, but this session recites the good news that God's eternal plan calls for redemption and the formation of holy people.

### focus on God's Word

Although Adam and Eve plunged us into corruption, God promised salvation through Eve's offspring. Later, God formed the nation Israel, and promised to bless all nations through Abraham. He gave the nation a moral law that reflected his character, and a summons to be a holy nation and to be separate from the world.

Jesus, God's virgin-born Son, came into the world to redeem us and form a new community, the church. As the new community, we are designed to be a holy nation. As Bounds and Lo point out on page 86 of *Unholiness*, "The church is the communal heir to final consummation with God. It is the bride of Christ."

All believers, both believing Jews and believing Gentiles, are one body, the church. Paul made this fact clear in Ephesians 2:11–22 and 3:3–6. As a redeemed, holy city of God, the church contrasts sharply with the city of man.

Jesus is the head of the body, the church, in which its members are bound together and to the head under his rule. By contrast, the city of man is idolatrous and exists under the Devil's rule. The church's unity reflects the unity of the triune God and reflects his glory. Jesus Christ transfers believing sinners out of the city of man and into the city of God.

The church has a universal character, in that it is composed of believers throughout the world. With few exceptions, those believers have united together in local churches for fellowship, worship, edification, the observance of the sacraments (ordinances), preaching and teaching of God's Word, and for the ministry of evangelism.

It is not the role of the church to impose its will on society; it simply bears witness to the city of God through its life as a community under Christ's rule. The church is willing to suffer and die for the faithful proclamation of the gospel. Bounds and Lo issue the following challenge on page 97 of *Unholiness*: "The temptation, though, is to withdraw completely from the world and forget Jesus' Great Commission to 'go and make disciples of all nations' (Matt. 28:19). We can live too easily in our 'Christian ghettos,' isolated entirely from the world. We retreat into our little communities and forget God's love for the city of man." Instead of withdrawing from the culture, the church should try to transform it by exerting its values in human culture.

In their conclusion of chapter 5 of *Unholiness*, Bounds and Lo state on page 102: "Only through restoration of the *imago dei* in the church can we, as the city of God, navigate the treacherous waters of the world. Such renewal of the moral, natural, and political image of God in us doesn't come by dabbling in the church, but by full participation in the church. In this earthly city of God, we experience the community for which we've been created as far as possible in fallen creation and learn to walk in victory over the world."

## focus on life

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How do you define *church*?
2. How does the church provide community for you?
3. What do you think is the church's chief purpose? Defend your answer.
4. How does the culture reflect the Devil's rule? Christ's rule?
5. Why do you agree or disagree that active participation in a local church is important?
6. How might your church do a better job of integrating new believers into its fellowship?
7. How might Christians do a better job of exerting their influence on the culture?
8. Why do you agree or disagree that the culture is shaping the character of the church?
9. Why do you agree or disagree that we Christians isolate themselves from the world?
10. Is it possible to have more unbelieving friends than believing ones? Why or why not?
11. Can Christians successfully impose biblical values on society? Why or why not?

## wrap-up

Suggest that group members invite a few non-Christian friends to their homes for light refreshments and an opportunity to exert a Christian influence.

## week 6

# the devil

## OUR ARCHENEMY

### to the facilitator

Shock accompanies any report of a Christian leader's moral downfall. We wonder how a person in a position of such high privilege and responsibility could turn his or her back on God and do the unthinkable. This session examines the career of an angel that fell from a position of extremely high privilege to the lowest moral level in history.

### focus on God's Word

Our archenemy is also God's archenemy, although before the dawn of human history he enjoyed a position close to God's throne and was an angel of light. His name, Lucifer, means "shining one" or "brightness," but his history is as dark as a starless night. When created, he was "morning star, son of dawn" (Isa.14:12). Ezekiel 28:12 describes him as "the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty." He was "anointed as a guardian cherub . . . on the holy mount of God" and "blameless in [his] ways" (vv. 14–15).

However, Lucifer lost his luster and privileged position. Elsewhere in Scripture, he is called Satan, meaning "hater, adversary, and enemy." He is the Devil, meaning "accuser" or "slanderer." Another alias is "dragon" or "ancient serpent" (see Rev. 12:9–12). Matthew 12:24 dubs Satan "Beelzebul," the head of the demons. Matthew 13:19 calls him the "evil one." He is also referred to as Belial, meaning "worthlessness" (2 Cor. 6:15). Jesus identified him as "the prince of this world" (John 12:31), and 1 John 5:19 states that "the whole world is under the control of the evil one."

Isaiah 14 tells us what transpired to turn the "son of the morning" into the Prince of Darkness. In a word, it was pride. Not content to be near God's throne, Lucifer conspired to usurp God from

his throne and then occupy it himself. But God crushed Lucifer's plan. He cast him down. On page 106 of *Unholiness*, we read: "Because of his sin, Lucifer's nature became altogether evil (John 8:44; 1 John 3:8). Sin corrupted his wisdom (Ezek. 28:17). He will eventually be disallowed access to God, where he now accuses believers (Rev. 12:7–10). Jesus judged him at the cross (John 12:31). And ultimately, he will be consigned eternally to the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10)."

Unable to gain supreme rule, the Devil tried to rule humanity. He successfully tempted Eve to heed him and rebel against God. In turn she persuaded her husband to join her in her disobedient act. As a result of their transgression, Adam and Eve and all subsequent human beings received the death penalty and hard labor. Death would be physical, spiritual, and eternal.

The human story is one of yielding to the Devil's strategies. He trips us up through the lust of the flesh (the sin nature), the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. Only the Holy Spirit avails to empower us to deny the lusts of the flesh and overcome Satan's assaults.

Jesus withstood the Devil's temptations by resorting to Scripture, and on the cross he dealt a decisive blow to our archenemy. We, too, can ward off temptation by effectively using Scripture.

Satan often tries to trip us up by bombarding us with trials, just as he used trials to try to get Job to curse God. However, Job remained steadfast in faith. We, too, can resist Satan by "standing firm in the faith" (1 Pet. 5:9). Like Job, we can trust God to do what is right and good in spite of difficult circumstances.

The remarks on page 115 of *Unholiness* are encouraging: "Satan is the believer's worst enemy, and he is also the craftiest. He despises God, hates God's redemptive work, and seeks to destroy God's people. But Satan is a defeated foe, and his time is limited. Someday God will cast him into the lake of fire. In the meantime, we must resist him in the faith, stay loyal to God, and persevere in holiness. Regardless of the temptations and harsh trials Satan inflicts on us, 'we are more than conquerors through him who loved us' (Rom. 8:37)."

## focus on life

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How do people today show the kind of attitudes Isaiah 14:12–14 indicates Lucifer displayed?
2. What kinds of problems and/or conflicts do you think Satan causes today?
3. Why do you agree or disagree that the Devil actively tries to destroy Christians' belief that the Bible is the Word of God?
4. When we sin, can we legitimately say, "The Devil made me do it"? Why or why not?
5. Why is Belial, "worthlessness," an appropriate name for the Devil?
6. In what sense is a life lived under the Devil's control worthless?
7. What accusations against believers do you think Satan brings to God?
8. Read 1 John 2:1. Why do you agree or disagree that Satan's accusations fail?
9. Why do you agree or disagree that a believer can become immune to temptation? Defend your answer.

10. What are some ways the Devil appeals to the lust of the flesh? The lust of the eyes? The pride of life?

11. How might the church help to safeguard believers from Satan's lies?

12. How has God's grace been sufficient for you in a recent trial?

### **wrap-up**

Have the group read or sing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" or "Yield Not to Temptation."

## week 7

# the devil's evil minions

### to the facilitator

Although the Devil is not omnipresent, he manages a worldwide network of evil spirits. When he rebelled against God's rule and tried to claim God's throne for himself, he led a host of angels in the attempt. Like him, they too were cast out of heaven. The authors of *Unholiness* comment on page 115: "The Bible refers to them as the Devil's angels, evil spirits, and demons. Jude wrote about 'angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their proper dwelling' and that God has kept them bound 'with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day' (Jude 6). Jude 7 compares the sin of those angels with the 'sexual immorality and perversion' of Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns."

### focus on God's Word

One activity the Devil's minions perform is that of propagating false religious teachings. They often appear as "apostles of Christ" (2 Cor. 11:13), and subtly lure people into false religion. Paul charged that they "masquerade as servants of righteousness" (v. 15).

Besides influencing people's thinking, evil spirits—demons—can also possess individuals. This was the case of the man who met Jesus in the region of the Gerasenes.

Jesus recognized the existence and activity of demons. He empowered his disciples to drive out evil spirits, and when he rebuked them for their little faith, he did not rebuke them for casting out demons. He also predicted a judgment, in which he will banish the wicked to "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41).

Revelation 12:7–9 describes a war in heaven, in which Michael and his angels fought against the Dragon (the Devil) and his angels. Satan and his angels were cast down to the earth.

Ephesians 6:12 informs us that we struggle against “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” We face a formidable foe that employs deception, temptation, lies, sexual images, the allure of worldly success, and discouragement to trip us and cause us to fall. He can even use violent weather to assault us. He used a violent storm to kill Job’s ten children (Job 1:18–19).

Daniel 10:13 reveals that Satan interrupted Daniel’s prayer for twenty-one days. He can distract or discourage us when we pray. So we need to *watch* and pray.

Satan is also able to perform counterfeit miracles to draw people into false religion. Revelation 13:13–14 describes the use of such miracles by a false prophet. The “miracles” are intended to draw people into the worship of a powerful, blasphemous dictator.

Our modern culture seems programmed to welcome visual images. Unfortunately, certain visual images can easily draw people into the occult. Only by looking to Jesus and testing the spirits can we experience victory over the Devil and his minions.

## focus on life

Discuss the following with your group.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that God created the angels with free will?
2. Lucifer displayed sinful pride in his attempt to usurp God. Are all manifestations of pride evil? Why or why not?
3. How do people try to usurp God today?
4. Why do you agree or disagree that an apparent nice pastor could be an agent of evil?
5. What key questions do you think a religious leader should be asked to determine whether he or she is an agent of truth or false doctrine?
6. What strategies do you think Satan uses most successfully to draw people into religious error?

Defend your answer.

7. Why do you agree or disagree that a criminally insane person might be demon-possessed?
8. Can a Christian become demon-possessed? Why or why not?
9. Which strategy does the Devil employ most effectively when you undergo a severe trial? How do you defeat that strategy?

9. How would you respond to the claim that demons do not exist? Defend your answer.

10. Why do you agree or disagree that the Devil cannot send a devastating tornado or other disaster—natural or otherwise—without God’s permission?

11. Why do you agree or disagree that Christians should not try to attribute all of life’s trials to demons?

12. How might dabbling in occult practices lead to demonic encounters?

## wrap-up

Challenge the group to memorize 1 Peter 5:8 this week and pray for strength to defeat temptation.

## week 8

# winning the war

### to the facilitator

The longest war in history lasted 335 years, from 1651 to 1986. It was between the Netherlands and the Isles of Scilly. However, a spiritual war has been raging since the dawn of human history. Explain that the Devil and his followers have been waging war against God and his people since the beginning of time.

### focus on God's Word

The Devil is not omnipotent. Christ delivered a fatal blow to him at Calvary, and someday God will cast him into the lake of fire. But we dare not underestimate his power. We cannot defeat him in our own strength. We can only resist him and overcome him in the strength of our Lord. However, we cannot draw upon the Lord's strength if our love for the Lord lags or grows cold.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, our risen Lord acknowledged that church's orthodoxy and service, but he said it left its first love. We may stay busy for the Lord and hold sound doctrine tightly, but we can easily fall into one of the Devil's traps if our love for the Lord grows cold. Love for the Lord motivates us to say yes to his will but no to the Devil's will.

Jesus counseled the church at Ephesus to remember and repent. If we remember how we first loved the Lord when he saved us and then repent of the sin of letting that love slip from us we will be restored to fellowship with the Lord. It will also secure victory over the Devil.

Peter fell into the Devil's trap when he exercised self-confidence rather than reliance on the Lord. He boasted that he would never fall away from the Lord "even if all fall away on account of [Jesus]" (Matt. 26:33). Only a short time later, he denied the Lord three times (vv. 60–75). When

he repented and was restored, he became a faithful apostle. In 1 Peter 5:7, writing from personal experience, he urged us to be alert because the Devil is on the prowl.

The Devil is never too lazy to fan the flames of a church fight, so we need to realize that our fellow believers are not the enemy, but the Devil is. We battle him and his evil hordes.

Our sin nature is in partnership with the Devil in his effort to make sin seem appealing. Therefore we need to be filled with the Spirit and order our behavior as he directs.

We can win the war against the Devil if we stand in his strength, put on the armor he has provided, and use spiritual weapons: the Word of God and prayer (Eph. 6:10–19). God’s truth is the belt that holds all the pieces of armor in place. The breastplate of righteousness protects our hearts. The footwear of the gospel of peace gives us firm footing. The shield of faith extinguishes the Devil’s fiery darts. The helmet of salvation protects our minds. It keeps us hoping during what seem to be hopeless situations. It wards off sinful thoughts, and stops discouragement in its tracks.

We cannot battle the Devil and his demons successfully by using manmade weapons. We can be successful only by wielding the Scriptures, the sword of the Spirit. Just as Jesus used the Scriptures to deflect temptation in the desert, so we must use it to turn aside the temptations Satan hurls at us. Saturating our minds and hearts with Scripture will enable us to lead a holy life in the power of the Spirit.

We need to pray in all occasions for all our fellow believers. We need to be alert when we pray, and we must never give up. To abandon prayer is to give the Devil an open door to our hearts and minds.

## focus on life

Discuss the following with your group.

1. How can you keep from underestimating the Devil’s power?
2. Why do you agree or disagree that Satan instigates persecution of believers?
3. Why is it important to love the Lord as well as sound doctrine?
4. Do you think many Christians loved the Lord more at the time of their conversion than they do now? Defend your answer.
5. How might a congregation gain victory over the Devil by loving one another?
6. Can a fallen believer be restored? If so, how?
7. Why do you agree or disagree that believers need to stay alert to enticements to sin that come through the media?
8. Read Ephesians 5:18. What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? Is it a one-time act or a continuous act? Explain.
9. How has knowledge of Scripture helped you resist temptation?
10. How might a believer overcome the temptation to be discouraged?
11. How can a busy person pray in the Spirit on all occasions?
12. Why do you agree or disagree that prayer requests should always be specific?

## wrap-up

Thank everyone for participating in this eight-week study. Ask volunteers to share whatever takeaway value they have gained. Before dismissing the group, ask for prayer requests, and then allow volunteers to pray for the requests.