

It is unclean for you

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[0 : 00] Leviticus chapter 11, reading from the first verse. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Say to the Israelites, of all the animals that live in land, these are the ones you may eat.

You may eat any animal that has a divided hoof and that chews the cud. There are some that only chew the cud or only have a divided hoof, but you must not eat them. The camel, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof.

It is ceremonially unclean for you. The higher axe, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof. It is unclean for you. The rabbit, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof.

It is unclean for you. And the pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud. It is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses. They are unclean for you. Of all the creatures living in the water, of the seas and the streams, you may eat any that have fins and scales.

But all creatures in the seas are streams that do not have fins and scales, whether among all the swarming things or among all the other living creatures in the water. You are to regard it as unclean. And since you are to regard them as unclean, you must not eat their meat.

[1 : 10] You must regard their carcasses as unclean. Anything living in the water that does not have fins and scales is to be regarded as unclean by you. These are the birds you are to regard as unclean and not eat because they are unclean.

The eagle, the vulture, the black vulture, the red kite, any kind of black kite, any kind of raven, the horned owl, the screech owl, the gull, any kind of hawk, the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, the white owl, the desert owl, and the osprey, the stork, and any kind of heron, the hoopoe, and the bat.

Of all flying insects that walk on all fours are to be regarded as unclean by you, there are some flying insects that walk on all fours that you may eat, those that have joined legs for hopping on the ground.

Of these you may eat any kind of locust, kitty did, cricket, or grasshopper, but all other flying insects that have four legs that you are to regard as unclean. You will make yourselves unclean by these.

Whoever touches their carcasses will be unclean till evening. Whoever picks up one of their carcasses must wash their clothes, and they will be unclean till evening. Every animal that does not have a divided hoof or that does not chew the cud is unclean for you.

[2 : 23] Whoever touches the carcass of any of them will be unclean. Of all the animals that walk on all fours, those that walk on their paws are unclean for you. Whoever touches their carcasses will be unclean till evening.

Anyone who picks up their carcass must wash their clothes, and they will be unclean till evening. These animals are unclean for you. Of the animals that move along the ground, they are unclean for you, and these are unclean.

The weasel, the rat, any kind of great lizard, the gecko, the monitor lizard, the wall lizard, the skink, and the chameleon. Of all those that move along the ground, these are unclean for you.

Whoever touches them when they are dead will be unclean till evening, and when one of them dies and falls on something in the article, whatever its use will be unclean, whether it is made of wood, cloth, hide, or sackcloth.

Put it in water, it will be unclean till evening, and then it will be clean. If any one of them falls into a clay pot, everything in it will be unclean, and you must break the pot. Any food you are allowed to eat that has come into contact with water from any such pot is unclean, and any liquid that is drunk from such a pot is unclean.

[3 : 30] Anything that one of their carcasses falls on becomes unclean. An oven over a cooking pot must be broken up. They are unclean, and you have to regard them as unclean. A spring, however, or a cistern for collecting water remains clean, but anyone who touches one of these carcasses is unclean.

If a carcass falls on any seeds that are to be planted, they remain clean. But if water has been put in a seed and a carcass falls on it, it is unclean for you. If an animal that you are allowed to eat dies, anyone who touches its carcass will be unclean till evening.

Anyone who eats some of its carcass must wash their clothes, and they will be unclean till evening. Anyone who picks up the carcass must wash their clothes, and they will be unclean till evening. Every creature that moves along the ground is to be regarded as unclean.

It is not to be eaten. You are not to eat any creature that moves along the ground. Whether it moves on its belly, or walks on all fours, or on many feet, it is unclean. Do not defile yourselves by any of these creatures.

Do not make yourselves unclean by means of them, or be made unclean by them. I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves to be holy, because I am holy.

[4 : 41] Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves along the ground. I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God. Therefore be holy, because I am holy. These are the regulations concerning animals, birds, every living thing that moves about in the water, and every creature that moves along the ground.

You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten, and those that may not be eaten. Amen. Outside the door of the nightclub, there stand the bouncers.

At the gates of Downing Street, there stand the armed policemen. These men in their different contexts have a very clear task. They prevent access by anyone who is not authorised to enter in.

The terms of access might vary, but the way in these contexts is not immediately open to all and sundry on whatever basis they might choose. There are conditions.

There are restrictions. And the book of Leviticus is about conditions of access. So we started with the problem that Moses and Aaron couldn't enter into the tabernacle at all.

[5 : 52] It was supposed to be the tent of meeting, but they could not go and meet with God. The system of sacrifice, the institution of the priests, provided a solution to that problem, and they duly entered in, accompanied by a great display of God's glory, as fire came out and consumed the sacrifices, showing God's pleasure at what had been done.

They were able to enter then, not because the glory of God had in any way diminished, but because they had been made fit for his presence. But chapter 10, with the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, present as a twofold issue.

The first question is how the tabernacle can be cleansed from the contamination of these dead bodies. It brings into sharp focus the broader issue of how the day-to-day grubbiness can be addressed.

You don't necessarily see the dust settling day by day, but you come back to dust to the mantelpiece after a week, a month, a year, and you can see it, sure enough. The tabernacle is in some ways like that.

The grubbiness is not so much physical as that it's contaminated by the sin going on all around it in the camp. Or every day, there is sin in the vicinity of the tabernacle, and it's affected by it.

[7 : 11] And the tabernacle needs to be cleansed from this inevitable defilement. And it's to that that we'll return when we come to chapter 16 and to the Day of Atonement. But the other issue that arises from the deaths of Nadab and Abihu is that we're forced to ask, well, okay, we see that there is some kind of access.

Moses and Aaron could go in, but we have to ask, well, what is the nature of this access? What are the limits? What are the conditions of coming into the presence of a holy God?

On what basis may which people enter? When? How far may they come in? And making that decision is all about making distinctions.

In the previous chapter, that's what God told Aaron his job is. Chapter 10, verses 10 and 11. Distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and teach the Israelites all the decrees the Lord has given them through Moses.

So these distinctions between holy and common, between clean and unclean, these distinctions are vital. The priests have to be able to make these assessments. They have to teach the people God's will, not least teach them to make these kinds of judgments, these kinds of decisions for themselves.

[8 : 29] And that's what the coming chapters of Leviticus are concerned with, making those distinctions. Which things are clean? Which things are unclean? What is holy?

And what is common? Now, we're going to dive in in a minute to the specifics of the food laws that we're looking at here in chapter 11. But first we need to kind of take the bigger picture of this question of holiness and so on.

And the most fundamental distinction, the most fundamental categorization is between that which is holy and that which is not holy. We could use the term unholy, but that sort of sounds actively negative, doesn't it?

Which isn't really what we mean. Again, sometimes you could talk about the opposite of holy being that which is profane, but that's a slightly archaic term and again, sounds a little bit negative.

Better to use the words holy and common, ordinary, every day. So there's a distinction between the holy and the common. And then a second distinction fits within the realm of the common.

[9 : 37] Clean and unclean are both subcategories of the common. And hopefully, yes, pictures are appearing on the screen behind me. And as you might expect, you can move between these different categories.

In general, you can move from the unclean end of the spectrum towards the holy end of the spectrum. You make that kind of a move by means of sacrifice.

And moves in the opposite direction are generally a result of sin or some kind of infirmity or inadequacy. So to move from the realm of the holy into the realm of the common, that's to be profaned.

And pollution takes something that was clean and makes it unclean, whilst cleansing does the opposite. And if you want to make something holy, you sanctify it. But what's important is, there's no shortcut here.

You can't move directly from the realm of the unclean straight from there into the realm of the holy. To become holy, to be set apart for God, to be fit for his presence, well, first you have to be clean.

[10 : 50] So it's only having made Israel clean by choosing them from among the nations, it's only having already made them clean that God then begins the process of making Israel into a holy nation.

So you have this spectrum. The other thing to recognize is that holiness and uncleanness, both of these are active, contagious.

They tend towards spreading their state. So the second half of chapter 11 is talking about how people become unclean by having contact with the carcasses of dead animals, or the carcasses of unclean animals at least, and the need for cleansing afterwards.

You know, all that business with if the carcass falls into the water, then the whole pot has to be destroyed. Because not just the carcass, but the water and the pot, all of it becomes unclean. Anything the water spills onto, it's unclean.

The uncleanness spreads. And things have to be cleansed afterwards. So the uncleanness spreads.

[12 : 01] What's maybe more surprising is to talk about spreading holiness, contagious holiness. It doesn't immediately sound right, does it, that mere contact would make something holy.

But the book of Exodus says exactly that. Exodus 29, 37, for seven days make atonement for the altar and consecrate it. Sanctify it, set it apart as holy.

Then the altar will be most holy, and whatever touches it will be holy. And the same applies in the next chapter to the table inside the tabernacle, the altar of incense, the lampstand, the utensils.

They are holy, and anything that touches them is holy. Shouldn't be a huge surprise. God describes himself in chapter 31 as the Lord who makes you holy.

He is the God who sanctifies. Through the prophet Ezekiel, later on, God says, even the priest's clothes can have that effect. Verse 19 of Ezekiel 44, when the priests go into the outer court where the people are, they are to take off the clothes they have been ministering in and leave them in the sacred rooms and put on other clothes so that the people are not consecrated through contact with their garments.

[13 : 23] The people would be made holy by touching the priest's clothes. And notice here in Ezekiel, that being made holy is something to be actively avoided.

They're told to take steps to stop that happening, which again seems slightly counterintuitive because we think of being holy as a good thing, and it is.

But what we've said already is you can't go directly from being unclean to being holy. And even when you're already clean, well, you can still only make the transition to being holy when you make that transition in the correct way.

In the right circumstances, then contact with the holy produces a beneficial result. But when that transition can be made correctly, then it's a good thing to become holy.

But in the wrong circumstances, that same contact with something holy results in destruction. Because the holiness is so absolute, so total is God's holiness, that anything that can't become holy, that isn't able to make that transition from clean or unclean towards being holy, anything that can't make that transition is instead destroyed.

[14 : 42] Nadab and Abihu consumed by fire. Because even as priests, even already being in some sense set apart, still they transgressed, and the perfect holiness of God consumed them.

But the aim here, the objective, is that they be made holy. It's a challenge, isn't it? It's a command. Be holy as I am holy, says God.

So you have the state of being unclean and the state of being holy. And both of these are inclined to spread out, to extend their bounds, their contagious things.

Well, therefore, two possibilities open up, don't they? On the one hand, there is the possibility that the holiness spreads. And you have a holy Israel in a holy cosmos, enjoying fellowship with a holy God.

That's kind of end state one, as it were. On the other hand, the uncleanness can spread. And you end up with a defiled Israel, with a defiled tabernacle, in a defiled land.

[15 : 53] And where then is a holy God? So the rules of chapter 11 and following that lay out the parameters of clean and unclean, this is the prerequisites.

The value of becoming clean, the value of being clean, is from the fact that you are then fit to be sanctified. Holiness is the objective. Being clean is a necessary precursor.

You can't get to holiness without first being clean. Hopefully, that will be helpful background tonight and for the following chapters as well. So there's a distinction specifically between the clean and unclean animals.

You've got two big sections in this chapter. The first part kind of categorizes animals, animals from the land, animals from the waters, animals from the skies, each divided into clean and unclean.

Then the second half of the chapter talks about that contamination caused by unclean animals. And with these lists before us of these different animals, with lists of animal after animal, this is clean, this is unclean, this is fit for eating, this is not.

[17 : 10] With these lists before us, surely we find ourselves asking, well, why these animals? What is it about these particular animals that means that some are clean and some are unclean?

Why is a pig unclean but a bison can be eaten? What is so awful about shellfish? You probably don't want to eat a centipede, but if you did, why shouldn't you?

We can see that in most cases, the individual species, they fit within kind of broad categories. You know, the classic land animal division, chewing the cud, parting the hoof. But even once you've got those categories, that just moves the question back a step, doesn't it?

Why those categories? And when you ask about the different categories, there's essentially four reasons that have been proposed. The first explanation for why these categories, why these particular animals, the first possibility is that they're just arbitrary.

This is the because I said so of reasons. Now, of course, God has every right to make pronouncements, and it's suddenly possible that his reasons are so far beyond our understanding as to be functionally arbitrary, unknowable to us.

[18 : 29] And maybe verses 44 and 45 point in this description as both set out a reason for these laws, beginning, for I am the Lord. Maybe the point is just that God wants there to be a division between the clean and the unclean, and actually where the division is doesn't really matter, just the fact that there is a division.

But it does seem like the idea of an arbitrary division is really one that we should only accept if we can't find another reason, if we can't see a logic to what's going on.

In recent years, it's been popular to suggest that the laws are essentially ordered around hygiene, that without a modern understanding of medicine and cleanliness, then explaining to people that pork might be a source of trichinosis might be not the most effective strategy, that if you want people to avoid that it's better to just say you can't eat pork.

And similar arguments can be made against eating birds that are carrion eaters and so on and so forth. And it's definitely true that God is concerned for the health, the self-safety, the well-being of his people.

Exodus 15, he calls himself the Lord your healer. And when we come on to skin diseases in the coming chapters, well, an argument there for isolating the infected for the benefit of others, it is not hard to fathom such a possibility.

[19 : 57] There are some significant problems with seeing this as a primarily hygienic distinction. First, medical science hasn't really advanced that much by the point that we get to the book of Acts and Peter's told everything is now clean.

Are we supposed to suppose that at that point God is no longer concerned for their health? Doesn't make a whole lot of sense. And secondly, it's questionable at best whether the hygiene of some of the animals that are branded unclean is really any worse than some of the clean edible animals.

You know, if you take the case of the pig, well, isn't it better to respond to the possibility of trichinosis by having a law about cooking the pork thoroughly rather than just forbidding it absolutely.

Hygiene leaves a lot to be desired as a potential explanation. Third possible reason, this is what we might call the cultic explanation.

So some of these animals to which these laws apply, some of these are animals that Israel is told to regard as unclean that are particularly associated with pagan worship.

[21 : 09] And there's some archaeological evidence for this, as a huge quantity of pig bones has been discovered at Tel Al-Farah that suggests that it was a sacred animal used in sacrifice in other religions in the area at the time.

But again, it doesn't really hold water as a complete explanation because bulls are a massively important feature of Canaanite and Egyptian sacrifices.

So the nation where God's people were in slavery before and the people of the land that they're being sent to possess are both sacrificing bulls. But not only are bulls clean, well we've just seen Moses and Aaron being commanded to sacrifice bulls in the preceding chapter.

So a simpler explanation of God doesn't like the animals that people think other gods like, it doesn't really work. Fourth possibility, a set of options kind of focused around what we might call symbolism.

Now you can take this symbolism to excess with convoluted associations between particular animals and their supposedly commendable characteristics. So Philo talks about how chewing the cud is representative of the contemplation and reflection in which God's people should engage, whilst a divided hoof represents our ability to distinguish.

[22 : 31] Now sure, there is potential value in being prompted to reflect on such things. Those of you who were at Tom Penman's prime meeting thinking about meditation, you know that something in the world about you might prompt you to think about God.

This is a legitimate category. but again, it doesn't work as a primary reason because I think it would be just as easy to come up with negative associations for chewing the cud as it is to come up with positive associations, isn't it?

You know, the idea of regurgitating an existing idea is hardly a positive one. So that sort of wooden or convoluted symbolism doesn't really work.

But there is a much broader kind of symbolism that probably is the main governing characteristic, the main feature that we should understand. A broader sense of symbolism that has a lot to commend it.

So there's a social anthropologist by the name of Mary Douglas and her work seems to avoid those dangers of weird symbolism, but instead she argues that they do have this symbolic significance, but she bases her interpretation on kind of reading the whole of the law together and relies on the distinctions that Leviticus emphasizes, not on things that happen to fascinate you or I.

[23 : 52] So she suggests that the distinctions between clean and unclean, that it centers around the ideas of wholeness or normality. So to be clean is to be an animal that conforms properly to its class.

So the quintessential fish, the definition of a fish, the fish that the child draws when you tell them, draw a fish, well that fish has scales.

So the fish, sea creatures that lack scales are lesser, are an aberration from the class, are less whole, are less normal, are less complete.

why can't you mix two crops together in one field, as chapter 19 will tell us? Well because it breaks boundaries. It removes the distinction that ought to exist.

And when you mesh these two things together, well neither is any longer whole, neither is complete anymore. why do priests have to be free of physical deformities?

[25 : 02] Because the priests have to represent wholeness, normality, they have to be proper instances of the type. Sacrificial animals not just have to be of a type of animal that's acceptable as a sacrifice, not just a clean animal, but they have to be whole, complete, free of deformity, perfect examples, the best from your flock.

So what you can do is you can kind of picture a series of concentric circles. So in the center you have the holy, and outside that the clean, and then the unclean.

And that holiness, cleanliness, and uncleanness, it's pictured in the priests, in God's people Israel, and then out into the Gentiles, the holy, the clean, and the unclean.

And the intention is that everybody moves ever inwards. But you can't go straight from being a Gentile to coming into God's presence. You have to first become clean by joining God's people, moving into that covenant relationship.

And the same is going on here with the animals. You've got the unclean animals, you've got the clean animals, and then within the clean animals, all the clean animals can be eaten, but within those only some are suitable for sacrifice.

[26 : 17] Only some are sacrificial animals. And if you're so inclined, you can make the same mapping with the wilderness, and the camp, and the tabernacle. Unclean, clean, holy.

So the animals and the camp environment, they're symbolic of the reality of the whole of the cosmos. They symbolize these distinctions.

And all these laws of clean and unclean have this goal of pursuing holiness. God's will is for all Israel to become holy. Therefore, on one end you've got that which is clean, even holy, represented by wholeness and normality.

And at the other end of the spectrum, disorder, incompleteness, deformity. And you can add another dimension on top of that. So Morales argues that the contrast between life and death is at the heart of these laws of cleanliness and uncleanness.

And that's really helpful when it comes to thinking about skin diseases and bodily discharges, a distinction between life and death. The things that make you unclean, well, it's because they're in some sense linked to approaching death or the loss of life.

[27 : 34] And childbirth and so on, these are clearly normal, these are not sinful things, but they make you unclean because of the loss of life liquids, because life has been reduced, because death has in some sense approached.

So when his sister Miriam becomes leprous, Aaron prays, let her not be as one dead whose flesh is half eaten away. And the link between the laws of God and life and death is clearly established in Deuteronomy 30.

Moses concludes his sermon there, he says, see, I've set before you today life and good, death and evil. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse.

Therefore choose life that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

And the animals fit into this same life and death distinction. lots of these unclean animals, they're associated with death in some fashion, either because they're carnivorous predators, even scavengers that feed on the already dead, some of them live in caves that are emblematic of tombs, or pigs, well, they're associated with specifically underworld deities, the, you know, Hades and so on.

[29 : 09] Underworld deities in pagan worship, it's a death association, is at least one possibility. So, these different possible reasons for the laws of clean and unclean.

John Curried argues we can conclude God mandated dietary laws for Israel for a combination of reasons. There does appear to be an element of being beneficial to health in at least some of the laws.

In addition, some of the laws are a polemic against pagan cults, a rejection of rival deities. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, the laws are a symbol of oneness and harmony, and a symbol of Israel's holy otherness.

And I would add to that that when we talk about there being a combination of these factors, we don't so much mean that one animal is unclean for hygiene reasons and another's unclean because of a symbol of oneness.

No, we're saying these different reasons cohere and come together and apply at the same time. Both are true simultaneously, maybe to differing degrees in different cases, but it shouldn't surprise us that an omnipotent God can draw together these disparate threads into a whole tapestry.

[30 : 24] It is certainly true that he is the Lord, our healer, and it is equally true that his holiness is absolute. I mentioned briefly verses 4 and 5 that begin, sorry, 44 and 45 that begin, I am the Lord your God.

But they say more than that. I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves and be holy because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves along the ground.

I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God. Therefore be holy because I am holy. These laws are about being holy, about living in fellowship with a holy God.

they are not arbitrary but rather are pointers to God's own holiness and the means of God's people's holiness or at least steps in that direction.

Now given all of that we then have to ask well what of this today? Why then are these laws set aside?

[31 : 31] Why do they no longer apply to you and me? Why is that which was once unclean no longer forbidden for our use? Does God not want us to be holy? Well of course he does.

See the specifics of these food laws these are no longer required as a dividing line as a marker of difference between Jew and Gentile. Jesus' atonement the gift of the Spirit these things yield true cleansing real cleanness for both Jew and Gentile and provide it by faith.

So the food laws that once symbolized and indeed maintained that distinction those food laws are no longer required to do that. But more fundamentally than that we have to remember that these laws are not set aside but rather these laws are fulfilled.

That is what Jesus said he came to do isn't it? He came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it. Christ kept the law on our behalf. And furthermore actually for you and me the law isn't set aside it's deepened it's extended.

Matthew chapter 15 Jesus called the crowd to him and said listen and understand what goes into someone's mouth does not defile them but what comes out of their mouth that is what defiles them.

[32 : 59] Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart and these defile them for out of the heart come evil thoughts murder adultery sexual immorality theft false testimony slander these are what defile a person but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.

So it is not that God is no longer interested in holiness it is not that he no longer calls us to wholeness and perfection but rather he calls us to a fuller understanding of what holiness truly is.

The law shows us just how seriously we need to take this question of cleanliness and holiness. The more fully we dive into the regulations of Leviticus the more fully we understand that our God is a consuming fire that our God is perfectly holy that his standards are absolute.

We see these high standards that he expects and we see that we cannot fulfill the laws demands. We cannot do these things we cannot produce holiness in ourselves and so Jesus shows us the path to true holiness that what comes out of your mouth is what defiles you not what goes into it.

The measure of your holiness is no longer what is on your plate but what is in your heart. Folks if we couldn't fulfill the demands of these laws of clean and unclean according to Leviticus 11 and the following chapters if we couldn't fulfill those laws in our own strength well we certainly cannot achieve pure hearts of our own initiative can we?

[34 : 51] We must pray again and again Lord create in me a clean heart it is what comes out of the heart that defiles we have to be dependent upon the Holy Spirit at work within us day by day we have to throw ourselves afresh on the gracious mercy of our God we must come daily in penitence and in faith to this holy God we cannot keep God's laws we know the one who kept them on our behalf praise God let's pray Lord God it is not easy for us to be reminded of how far short of your perfect holiness we fall we do not like to remember that we cannot keep your laws demands and yet we know it is good for us to recognize this it is to our profit to see how far short we fall because we know that we need your mercy and grace that we need you to create pure hearts because we do not have the power to do it that we need you to cleanse us from the inside out so keep us coming to you to do that for us we pray keep us coming to you in repentance and in faith in daily dependence upon your grace and mercy amen