

Is God Fussy about Cleanliness?

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[0 : 00] Now, if this is your first time with us, let me just explain. It might seem like a really strange place to be having a Bible talk in Leviticus 11. But we've been working through the book of Leviticus, and we're getting to the middle point.

So this is actually our last Sunday for a while, and then in 2024, we'll come back to chapter 16. So we thought you needed a break. So that's the reason.

But you should find an outline as well. I'm going to explain a bit to the rest of you as well, because we're going to be doing something slightly different tonight as well.

So I guess you heard the reading, and I wonder whether you felt it was all a bit strange. It may, I suppose, be because you think that there are animals on that unclean list that you have been eating all this while.

And so you might be thinking, is it wrong for me to do so as a Christian now? And yet, I think we all know, don't we, that most cultures have some sort of list of things that that particular culture doesn't eat.

[1 : 16] Sometimes it's for religious reasons. I'm sure you have your own list as well. And this is not due to allergies or just taste. But you know, there are, you know, there are just some animals, the very thought of which just turns you off, doesn't it?

But you may also know that at the very same time that it's turning you off, these animals are actually delicacies for some other culture.

So like the French for instance, you know, I'm thinking about the French because of the Tour de France, but the French, they eat snails and frogs.

Someone said horse this morning as well at the other service. Scorpions and other insects you might find in the markets of Asia, some countries in Asia.

Now, we don't think of these as clean and unclean, but it's sort of the same result, isn't it? Don't eat versus eat.

[2 : 20] Well, today I'm going to try and cover chapters 11 to 15 all in one night. Now, if anything, if you read some of the later chapters, you would find that they were even stranger still.

But all of them deal with one common thing about what is clean versus what is unclean. So if you look at your outline, the way I've tried to break up the chapters, chapter 11 deals with food that you put into your body.

By contrast, chapter 12 and then chapter 15 again deal with what comes out of the body. All right? One's in, food. The other one's what comes out of the body. So rules on what bodily discharges cause uncleanness, how to be purified from them.

And in chapter 12, childbirth is included because of the excessive bleeding that occurs, blood coming out of the body. Chapter 13 then deals with what grows on the body, what sort of skin diseases make someone ritually unclean.

The steps then a priest would take to work out whether it was or not. And for a long time, there has been a quest to try and work out what these diseases actually are.

[3 : 39] But even though there's no conclusive view, the consensus is that contrary to popular belief, the skin disease that's in question is actually not leprosy.

All right? A lot of times people have said, oh, it's leprosy. It's not. It's some other kind of disease. It might be a rash or some sort of thing like that. But ultimately, what these diseases are is less important than understanding that whatever they are, let's call it ritually defiling skin diseases, the effect is to make a person unclean.

Now then, when we get to the later part of chapter 13, it also deals with unclean garments and how to identify certain molds that grow on them.

Because touch, we will discover, is also something that makes someone unclean. And then when we get to chapter 14, we are given an explanation of the process by which an unclean person, whether it's a skin disease or whether there's mold growing in the house, can be cleansed from it.

So you see that the way I've described each of these sections is that I've used the word body as the common focus through the chapters. And that's because the focus of Leviticus is on how the people of God in their bodies can dwell with and approach a holy God.

[5 : 08] And just as we've been seeing over the last few weeks, the offerings that are being presented to the Lord, how they have to be without defects, so someone approaching God and the people dwelling with God have to also be clean.

And in the case of the priests, after they're clean, made holy through consecration. Now, just to prepare you and assure you probably, I won't be going through each and every verse in the passage of the four chapters or the five chapters tonight.

And I won't even be going through any specific passage today. So not even the Old Testament reading that was just given. Rather, what I'm trying to do tonight is just to point out a few key ideas that I think tie all the passages together.

So I'll jump around a bit. But I'm hoping that you then go home and read it through yourself and then try and work out whether those themes that I've raised actually resonate with the passages.

So first, I want to just say that throughout these chapters, the Bible's concern here, even though we've been talking about it, isn't about health or physical cleanliness.

[6 : 22] All right? It may appear so, but this is not a medicinal guide. So you doctors or doctors-to-be, don't look this up and work out, you know, how you're meant to practice your medicine.

Of course, you wouldn't. Of course, you wouldn't pass your exams if you did that. But it's not a manual either for curing diseases. There's not instructions here about how you're to clean your house so as to avoid these diseases.

And when it comes to clean and unclean foods, this is not a list of the clean foods you are to eat in order to be healthy and physically well. Rather, as I said earlier, these are here for a sinful people to dwell with a holy God.

It's about being ritually clean. Being ritually unclean is actually an outward thing that's a pointer or an indication to something's happening inside, that of human sin, being spiritually unclean.

And what is manifested outside is intended to be a picture of what God is seeking inwardly and spiritually. But we mustn't draw the wrong conclusion here, right?

[7 : 40] The Bible isn't saying that just because a person is ritually unclean, that therefore they're more sinful than someone who is clean. So a mother isn't sinning when she gives birth to a child, even though as she gives birth, it makes her ritually unclean.

What God is instead indicating is that being unclean, generally for the people, bars someone from coming to God.

The ritual uncleanness is pointing to something more serious, which is spiritual uncleanness, or sin, which is internal and invisible. This whole system of clean and unclean food, clean and unclean bodies, is therefore an analogy.

It's a visible sign, which is very much part of their daily routines, that serves as a reminder that God takes holiness seriously.

And note also that although being ritually unclean isn't sinful, if you disobey the laws that deal with them, then you are sinning.

[8 : 51] See the distinction? Being ritually unclean is not sin in itself, but if you disobey God's laws that deal with it, then you are sinning. Nevertheless, as a picture of God's holiness, being unclean, as I said, does stop someone from approaching God.

So, if you look on the slide, or if you look in your Bibles, Leviticus chapter 12, verse 4, it says there that a mother is unclean for giving birth, and so can't approach the sanctuary or touch anything sacred until the days of her purification are over.

Even more drastic, Leviticus, next one, chapter 13, verse 44, if you have a ritually defiling skin disease, then you can't even live in the camp.

But they must live alone, outside the camp. Now, some of the reasons for these and some of the details may sort of baffle us, but the general idea, I think, as you read through it, is that there is an idea of what constitutes physical wholeness.

So, God, as the creator and designer of the world, has created, if you like, an intended state of the human body. That's a concept of what wholeness means, or looks like.

[10 : 07] And any deviation from it, whether it's temporary, and most times it's temporary or not, and often without any fault of the person itself, however it comes about, still constitutes uncleanness.

So, death, loss of blood, other bodily discharges, or flaws in the skin of the human, these represent the loss of wholeness, and thus causes uncleanness.

And this uncleanness can be transmitted as well, as I've said, by touch, so that when someone who is clean touches someone or something that's unclean, they become unclean as well.

Likewise, the eating of unclean animals makes one defiled. Now, in regards to the food and clean animals, there's been a lot of debate as to why the animals have been divided as such, okay?

It's a bit hard to work out, but for the animals in the land, for example, chewing the cud and having divided or split hooves largely, I think, defines animals that are livestock, considered livestock.

[11 : 20] And so, it's been then considered clean for eating. Now, whether, you know, they were already considering them as livestock and therefore God defined them to be clean or God defined them to be clean and then they therefore became livestock, we don't know the sort of genesis or history of that.

But you will notice that there's twofold conditions, isn't it? So, it's not just chewing the cud, not just having divided hooves, but both that makes an animal clean.

Likewise, if you look at the list regarding the fish of the sea, it's only a clean animal if it has fins and scales. So, a shark, which has fins but no scales, isn't clean for the juice to eat.

There's a bit of a shame for us Asians that like shark fin soup, right? Now, some have wondered if all these are defined for health reasons because unclean animals, for example, carry diseases.

I don't think that's true. Others think, for example, that chewing the cud is symbolic of, you know, deep reflection, which you all do by reading my weekly pass the chews cud, you know, to be encouraged and therefore you can eat.

[12 : 34] Again, I don't know whether that's right or not because then what is divided, who's all about, you know? At the end of the day, therefore, I've come to the conclusion that there's really not one single explanation that satisfies the whole list.

And to be honest, I think it's probably not important because all these animals are God's creatures. And so, he has the prerogative at the end of the day to determine what's clean and what's not clean.

And by declaring what's clean, what he's done is to define a small group of animals within the animal kingdom that he's given to humans for food.

So, you can eat all this, but not all of this, right? So, what God says, therefore, is what defines what is clean and pure.

It's a ritualistic thing, all right? It's not anything to do with the animal itself. So, for example, it's not that the lamb is clean because it's a more hygienic animal than the camel, let's say, right?

[13 : 41] Neither of them sort of bathe themselves or have any, you know, use soap or whatever. No. It's just that God says it's clean and the camel's not. So, there you go. Now, notice as well that it is also only among the clean animals that God then allows people to make offerings to him.

And even here, it's not all clean animals that can be offered to the Lord, right? So, as we've been reading, it's only the lamb, the goat, the bull, the dove, and the pigeon that can be offered as sacrifices to the Lord.

But all of these are clean animals. So, these subset of animals, clean animals, serve the added purpose of becoming, as it were, holy food consumed by God.

You know, which God then allows the priest to share in. And then in certain situations, the people can as well. So, it's sort of like, oh, these are the animals.

These are the clean animals you can eat. And these are the clean animals you can offer to me. And what's more, we, God, and the people can feast together with these animals, right?

[14 : 47] Can you see there's a sort of subset of each as you go along? Which brings me to the second idea, which I already mentioned earlier in the weeks before. And that is that there is a continuum between what's unclean and what's clean, and therefore what's holy.

So, remember, there's a diagram on the slide here. Remember last week, Aaron was taught by Moses to teach the people what's holy and what's common, right? And then, within what's common, to distinguish between what's clean and unclean.

Well, again, the same idea you'll see throughout the chapters, right? There's unclean and clean animals, and then clean animals, some of which can be offered as holy food to God.

Likewise, God's people can go from one ritual state to another as well. So, the priests need to be clean and washed before they can then be consecrated to be holy and serve at the temple.

Similarly, objects, whether it's houses or utensils, can become unclean. And it's only clean objects that can be consecrated for tabernacle use. But God, in His graciousness, doesn't just declare things unclean, defiled.

[15 : 59] In the chapters, chapter 14 in particular, He provides for them to be made clean, even though they have been defiled. So, the process can be reversed, and God allows for that.

Now, as you read through the chapters, sometimes this is simply a function of time. But in other instances, God gives specific steps for purification. So, a good example is in the next slide, Leviticus chapter 11, verse 24.

You will make yourselves unclean by these touching dead animals. Whoever touches their carcasses will be unclean time till evening. Whoever picks up one of their carcasses must wash their clothes, and they will be unclean till evening.

So, you see here, degrees of impurity. Touching a dead animal presumably could be accidental and incidental. That only makes you unclean until the evening.

You don't have to do anything else. But if you handle the animal, which is a more intentional act, you need to then wash your clothes as well. Right? A bit more impure.

[17:00] Likewise, back to Leviticus chapter 12, verse 4 earlier, the mother of a new baby is unclean for a longer time than just the seven days of her monthly period.

After which, she then has to take steps of purification as well. Now, we're thinking all these things, and we're thinking, well, this is a bit unfair of God. I don't think that the intention here is to ostracize the particular unclean person because they have this or that skin disease.

Yes, the isolation, the exclusion is painful, and the person is excluded from the community. But the focus ought to be on God's holiness.

This is the effect of uncleanness and sin on our ability to approach God, which would be the idea and the picture. What sin does collectively and individually is what the people are meant to be focusing on.

I think it's fortunate that I'm preaching this after COVID because if you think about it, COVID was a bit like that, wasn't it? So initially, you know, when they all came about, we were all so afraid of the person with COVID, right?

[18:12] You know, don't go in the same room, you know, stand away, and if they touch something, wipe, wipe, wipe, do all that kind of stuff, right? And then isolate, stay in your room, don't go to the house, whatever. And then, of course, then we thought, no, no, hang on, hang on.

These people we love as well, right? We need to be able to care for them. So for example, when I finally got COVID, yes, I did have to isolate. But, you know, I was showered with love by my family, right?

Special room service for seven days. Just needed to text, and there it was at the door. So I was being loved, wasn't I? Because the family loved me.

And then for us as a church as well, you know, we started to make sure we prayed for one another, dropped care packages. We did a lot of things to care for the person, even though they were isolated and excluded from the community for a while.

And so, likewise, I think this is what's going on here. The person himself or herself has to go and live outside the camp, but that doesn't mean that the people wasn't allowed to care for them or to long for their return.

[19:22] Rather, it was a picture, wasn't it, of what sin and uncleanness does to our relationship with God. And so that's the third thing that we come to, the third idea, and that is alongside the continuum of what's clean to what's holy or what's unclean to what's holy, there's also a separation that's required between what's holy from what's unclean.

Anyone or anything that's unclean is to be separated from God. Only when they're consecrated can they be brought to God's presence for use. And if you look at the layout of Israel's camp, which I've got a diagram here to show, that's being illustrated, the principle of that is being illustrated, isn't it?

You see from the diagram that as we move out of the concentric circles, there are decreasing degrees of holiness and cleanliness. So right at the center, the most holy place, that's God's dwelling place, right in the middle of the tabernacle, within the holy place itself, out of which it's set within the holy place, out of which we then have the tabernacle, right?

All of that is holy. Then outside the tabernacle, separating the tabernacle, separates the holy place from the camp. And the camp has to be clean.

And then outside the camp is where people who are unclean and whatever, that's where it goes. And people, depending on their ritual state of cleanliness, are allowed to move between these different spaces accordingly.

[20 : 56] Those who are unclean, as I've said, outside the camp, only the priest can enter the holy place, and then only the high priest can enter into the most holy place, as we will see in chapter 16, once a year.

And if you pan out further, you will see that Israel herself is to be separated from the nation, set apart. Why? Because God calls her a holy nation, called out from darkness.

And so God's instructions for life within the camp, within Israel, is almost a mirror of their relationship with the rest of the world. And that's why Israel is also called a kingdom of priests, because they're set apart as a nation to serve God, just like the priests, and bear witness to the nations on his behalf.

Thus, you will read in Leviticus chapter 11, verse 44 and 45, God gives this rationale for the food laws. 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 out of Egypt, darkness, to be your God.

[22 : 09] Therefore, be holy, because I am holy. And this whole idea of being set apart was so ingrained in them that, you know, the Jews, even when they became Christians, they had to overcome the hurdle, didn't they?

Which we will see in Acts chapter 15, of being able to eat with Gentile Christians. Because for so long, they've been thinking, we Jews, we have to eat clean foods. You Gentiles, you've been eating unclean foods, so we can't eat with you.

But all that changed when Jesus came. But they needed to grapple with that. Because this, all of this in Leviticus, had so become their practice, that they needed God to open their eyes as to what's changed.

And likewise, when we get to the end of chapter 15, verse 31, the importance of being clean before God is further explained. So you must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them.

That is, my place is holy, and if you come in and you're unclean, then you will make my place unclean. And therefore, the result is death. And we may think that it's really severe, isn't it?

[23 : 26] That if I accidentally unclean and then you walk into God's presence, you know, why is God so strict on this? Well, because being unclean, even if it's just ritual uncleanness, is an indication of something much more serious, and that is being spiritually unclean.

And whereas only some Israelites were ritually or physically unclean, it's meant to show that all of Israel, everyone without exclusion, was spiritually unclean because of sin.

And so, if you think about it, if God demands such high standards just for ritual uncleanness, how much more when it comes to spiritual uncleanness? How much more strict he would have to be?

How much more severe he would have to be? Now, there's a lot more that could be said. And of course, you might have a lot of questions about the detail. I encourage you to think over them.

But I think it's also important not to get bogged down with the detail because if I've hopefully been successful, the main ideas of these passages are actually quite clear, isn't it?

[24 : 37] And straightforward. That being physically unclean is a pointer to sin. And sin separates us from God. And the laws about ritual uncleanness is meant to teach the people this truth.

All right. So, that's Leviticus chapter 11 to 15. And I guess the question that might be in your minds is, what about us now?

After all, Jesus did declare all foods clean when he came. So, in Mark chapter 7, verse 18 and 19 on the slide, don't you see that nothing that enters a person from outside can defile them?

For it doesn't go into the heart, but into their stomach and then out of the body. So, if that's the case, then what are these laws here for? Is it just to amuse us?

Or can we still apply them somehow? Well, to begin with, the good news. The good news is that we don't need to worry about what we can eat anymore.

[25 : 38] So, crispy pork with crackling skin. Lobster and prawns. Bring it on. It's fine.

Okay. So, you might be happy about that. Maybe not. But for me, that was a good thing. Likewise, by extension, the laws around skin diseases and moldy houses and, you know, childbirth, we don't need to literally follow them anymore.

Although, my advice to you is that if you do have mold in your house, please have a look at it anyway. But these laws, they don't need to be applied literally now.

Okay. So, that's the good news. Because Jesus taught us that we are to worship him now in spirit and truth. It's not about approaching God at a physical holy temple anymore.

We worship him in spirit and truth. All right. Both of which are holy and clean, by the way, when you think about it. And yet, sin and spiritual uncleanness still matter, as it did in Leviticus.

[26 : 41] Because Jesus now goes on to say, in chapter 7 and verse 20 of Mark, it's what comes out of the person which defiles them. For it is from within, out of the person's heart, that evil thoughts come.

Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. And this list is by no means exhaustive.

All these evils come from inside and defile a person. And so, by this definition, I wonder who of you today here can claim to be clean inside.

Who of you can say you're clean, even though outwardly you may be very clean. You may have had your shower and put on perfume before you came. But, have we never been guilty of greed or envy, arrogance, or deceit?

Now, some of you are doing the Christianity Explored course right now on Wednesday night. And you might remember a recent video by Rico Tice, as the presenter.

[27 : 51] Remember, he went through this illustration asking us to imagine how we would feel if our entire lives, every single second of it, was played like a movie and projected on a wall.

Every thought, word, deed is displayed for all to see. Nothing is hidden. What would you think about that? Would that scare you? As Rico said, there may be parts of our lives like joyful occasions or good deeds, which we're happy for others to see.

But there will also be things that we're ashamed of, isn't it? Evil thoughts. Being jealous of others. False accusations. Things that go through our heads, even if we don't say it aloud.

It doesn't take much honesty, does it? To realize just how defiled we are. Now, of course, over the last weeks in Leviticus, we've seen that, thanks be to God, His Son, Jesus, His blood is able to cleanse and purify all righteousness in us.

So we don't need to be banished from God's presence. We don't die when we come into it because of Jesus. And what's more, as I've said last week, we're also made holy by the Spirit, anointed, pleasing to God, but all because of Jesus.

[29 : 16] And so if you're here today and you have not put your faith in Jesus, then let me urge you to do that because He's our only way to life with God. But for those of us who have, what we do with our bodies still matter to God.

Just as it did in Leviticus, what we do with our bodies reflect what's in our hearts. When we don't give our bodies and eyes over to sexual sin, when we control our tongue, when we use our bodies to serve others and care for them, we offer our bodies as living sacrifices in service to God.

And as we live together this way, as a church, we are like Israel, aren't we? God's holy nation, set apart for Him, with the Holy Spirit dwelling in our midst.

But of course, this idea of being set apart is no longer about physical separation, is it? Jesus calls His disciples to be in the world, even though they're not of the world.

So being set apart is not about physical separation, but distinctive living. Not about physical separation from the world, but distinctive living from the world.

[30 : 38] Living not out of greed or selfish ambition, serving the weak and not using our strength for our own advantage. Now I know that for some of us, that's a real challenge, isn't it?

As we go to work or uni or school, because we may find that we are the only ones doing that, or wanting to do that, because the culture of the place doesn't encourage us to live God's way.

And you know, we may not want to stand out, but you know, actually, that's what being set apart means. Distinctive living. We may even draw attention to ourselves for that. Other people may not like us for that.

It might be costly. And yet, that's the thing that makes us reflect and shine with God's character. Bearing witness to His Son.

Being set apart so that we can be a holy people for God. But remember, as we do all these things, and I encourage you not to be afraid to do it, it's still what's inside that counts.

[31 : 37] In other words, we're not doing it just to go through the motions. We're not doing it just to show others how good we are. Because that was the problem, isn't it? Israel had these laws, and the Pharisees, by the time He came to the Pharisees, they were the ones who mastered, didn't they, the art of outward cleanliness.

Right? But Jesus rebuked them, because it masked, it hid, the evil that was still in their hearts. Jesus called them whitewashed tombs.

They looked great. The tomb was white. But what was inside? Hopes. Sin. Self-righteousness. Pride. And so I think it's easy for us to fall into that too, if we neglect looking inside at our hearts, to see whether we need to deal with sin, or pride, greed, lust.

Things that no one really knows, but God does. And as Jesus says in Mark 7, the inside is what really matters to God, not the outside.

Now often, as is the case, what's inside eventually comes out anyway. Right? Very hard to hide. You know, sometimes we might not even say the word, but you know, we just roll our eyes.

[32 : 51] And that's contempt. Right? So, it's hard. Eventually, from within, our evil comes out, is what Jesus is saying. So, let me end by encouraging you to work on the inside.

Keep working on what's in our hearts. And then together as Christ's body, let's live in such a way that we bring glory to God as his holy people. Let's pray.

Father, thank you that Jesus cleanses us from all unrighteousness and that we aren't bound by the same laws of ritual purity anymore. Help us, however, not to neglect what is inside, spiritual uncleanness.

But help us to humbly bring them to you. Bring them to your Son for cleansing by his blood. and then live our lives. Help us to live our lives set apart for you as your holy people.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.