

Maintaining Purity in God's presence

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Now you might think that your mum or dad has put me up to this, or that housemate who's a cleanliness freak has given me this to say, but I'm going to say it anyway.

And that is you are probably aware from them that there are many aspects to keeping a kitchen clean. Because it's not just washing the dishes after a meal, is it?

The cooking pots and pans that were used and left on the stove, they have to be cleaned as well.

Food scraps need to be thrown away.

And of course, if there are any leftovers, they have to be stored away in the fridge to proper health safety standards. Oh, and the dishes don't just have to be washed, do they? And then just left to dry on the rack? No.

They need to be dried and stored away. And not just stored away, but stored away in the right places. Not randomly just put back into the cupboard, but you know, the plates in the same stack, and the bowls in the other, the cutlery in the same, in the right tray, in the right drawer.

[1 : 15] And then the garbage has to be taken out, and not just left lying on the kitchen top. And if you leave any of that out, then the kitchen isn't totally clean. Correct?

Thanks Delaney. Oh, and I also forget, that's me, that the splatter of the sauce on the splash back of the stove.

That too has to be cleaned every time, isn't it? Oh, and the food scraps that are still in the strainer in the sink. That one, I also forget.

So, that's probably why my kitchen is never clean, but that's another story. And something similar happens with purity in God's presence.

There are many aspects and facets to God's purity, or to purity, and it is a requirement of God for absolute purity when we come into His presence.

[2 : 15] Now, some aspects of this are covered in chapter 5 and 6, and if you were with us last year when we looked through Leviticus, you'd probably be familiar with them. So, skin diseases, mould in houses, dead bodies.

You can find all those details back in Leviticus. So, what we find here today is actually not new, neither is it comprehensive, but rather a summary, if you like, in order to represent the range of things that can defile purity in a camp.

Now, some of these are even unintentional. But the effect is still that cleansing is required in order to remain in God's presence. So, if you look at the list there, I've got four.

The first is ceremonial purity that's related to physical things. Then, secondly, relational purity between fellow Israelites.

But then, thirdly, also relational purity within a family between husband and wife. And then, fourthly, devotional purity, that which concerns an Israelites' relationship with God.

[3 : 25] And I think that's how you connect all the various sections in these two chapters. So, my aim today is given time not to cover every detail in the passage.

And the fact of the matter is, most of them are not relevant anyway for us as we practice our faith as Christians. They are Old Testament laws, as it were.

But what we want to do is to glean the principles that apply to us for today. So, let's begin with the first section, which deals with physical purity. So, verse 1, The Lord said to Moses, The Lord said to Moses, Command the Israelites to send away from the camp anyone who has a defiling skin disease or a discharge of any kind, who is ceremonially unclean because of a dead body.

Send away male and female alike. Send them outside the camp so they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them. The Israelites did so. They sent them outside the camp. They did just as the Lord commanded or had instructed Moses.

So, first we have a reminder that this is all a requirement because God dwells among them. And the symbol of which is the presence of the tabernacle. And as a result, the camp around the tabernacle then must be kept pure and undefiled.

[4 : 40] And we are given three situations here that makes someone unclean and therefore their presence in the camp defiling. First, skin diseases.

Then secondly, discharges. Both of which, as I said, were described back in Leviticus chapter 13 to 15, if you want to go and look that up. But third then, we have dead bodies.

Now, dead bodies was actually covered in Leviticus, but only for priests. Now, we're told that it also applies to all Israelites. Now, in each of these situations, we're not told how long a person is to remain outside the camp.

And some of this, again, is covered in Leviticus. But what is more important is really what it symbolizes, rather than the precise rules. The person or the people who are unclean, in this case, is not guilty so much as wrongdoing or immoral act, but they are simply ceremonially unclean. Their physical or external impurity is a representation of the importance of purity to God. So important is this, that God even says ceremonially unclean people have to be excluded from the camp.

[5 : 58] What they do is, of course, point to the impact of real sin and immorality that truly separates us from God, spiritually.

And it's only when an individual is made clean by some time or process that they then can return into fellowship with God's people and with God Himself. And here, as well, at this point, we're given a note, aren't we, that the Israelites, at this point in time, remain obedient to the Lord's commandments.

They do as Moses instructed them. So that's the first type of impurity. The second is in verse 5, and we turn our attention then to relational impurity, where a real wrong is committed against another. Say to the Israelites, Now, again, more detail is given to us in Leviticus 6, where the sacrifices themselves are being described.

But here we're reminded that when we wrong someone, there are actually two aspects to that sin. First, there is the vertical. There is a wrong done against God, which demands an offering of atonement.

[7 : 25] But second, there is a wrong done against the person himself or herself, horizontally. And the remedy for that is restitution, and then adding a penalty of 20%.

So not just pay back what you took, but pay back plus 20%. And Jesus says Himself in the Sermon of the Mount that there are actually these two aspects of making things right, isn't it?

Because He says that if someone wants to bring an offering or gift to the altar for God, but they realize that a brother has wronged them, they are to be reconciled first with them.

So the horizontal needs to happen in conjunction with the vertical. And both of these are important to God and have to be addressed in order for the camp to remain pure.

So much so that even when restitution is not possible, because it says here that the person or their family is no longer around, the wrongdoer still needs to make restitution.

[8 : 30] Only this time, it goes to the Lord. And the priest that receives it then gets to enjoy the benefits of this restitution.

Now, we get to the third scenario then, relational purity, but this time between husband and wife. And so this is more intimate in nature, and there's also a little twist to it.

Now, what's going on here is not overt and proven adultery, right? The sin, if it occurs or exists, actually cannot be proven.

There's even a risk that should the accusation be false and punishment meted out against the wife, then what we have is unjust punishment as a result.

So, what the law provides then is a way for Israel to deal with this. So that if a sin is committed, it's rightly punished. And if it's not, the relationship between the wife and the husband can be restored.

[9 : 42] Otherwise, there is the ongoing suspicion that continues to undermine trust in the marriage. Now, all this is sort of rather foreign sounding to us.

So I wanted you to just read along with me, not import our modern day preconceptions or conceptions into it, and then try and understand actually what it was trying to do for the people at the time.

So, verse 11. Verse 11. Speak to the Israelites and say to them, if a man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, so that another man has sexual relations with her, and this is hidden from her husband, and her impurity is undetected, since there was no witness and she has not been caught in the act, and if feelings of jealousy come over her husband and he suspects his wife and she is impure, Or, if he is jealous and suspects her even though she is not impure, then he is to take his wife to the priest.

He must also take an offering of a tenth of an ephah of barley flour on her behalf. He must not pour olive oil or put incense on it, because it is a grain offering for jealousy, a reminder offering to draw attention to wrongdoing.

So what the Lord is saying is that instead of jumping to a hasty conclusion where you don't have concrete evidence, what the husband is actually asked to do is to take his wife to the priest.

[11:10] Alright? Not drag her and throw her and say, find her guilty, but take her. And also, he has the responsibility to take and provide the grain offering to bring before the Lord.

And it's called a reminder offering because the intention here is to petition God to bring to his mind whether a wrongdoing has occurred. That's why it's a reminder offering to draw attention to wrongdoing.

And so, reading on, what the priest does is bring her, have her stand before the Lord. Then he shall take some holy water in a clay jar and put some dust from the tabernacle floor into the water.

After the priest has had the woman stand before the Lord, he shall loosen her hair and place in her hands the reminder offering, the grain offering for jealousy. While he himself holds the bitter water that brings a curse, then the priest shall put the woman under oath and say to her, If no other man has had sexual relations with you and you have not gone astray and become impure while married to your husband, may this bitter water that brings a curse not harm you.

But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and you have made yourself impure by having sexual relations with a man other than your husband, here the priest is to put the woman under this curse. May the Lord cause you to become a curse among your people when he makes your womb miscarry and your abdomen swell.

[12:34] May this water that brings a curse enter your body so that your abdomen swells or your womb miscarries. Then the woman is to say, Amen. So be it.

Now, if you read sort of ancient literature, there are actually similar kind of tests during those times with other nations. They are called trials by ordeal.

And although superficially they might look alike, what God is doing here is actually quite different. There are a number of key differences. The first is that this test occurs with the woman's consent.

So she says, Amen to the curse that's about to be put on her. And she knows that she can say, Amen, if in fact she's not guilty. And the curse then therefore only takes effect because God will only bring it upon her if she is truly unfaithful.

And God alone knows, right? So this is distinct to other cultures because with the other nations, the test often involves peril. So it might be a test which involves them being thrown into a raging river or being put through fire.

[13:47] And it's only if they are innocent that somehow there will be a miraculous escape. So it's really they are guilty until proven innocent, right?

Whereas here the principle is that the woman is innocent until proven guilty. And not so much proven but pronounced guilty by the Lord.

Now you might think that the water there is a bit yucky and a bit bitter, drinking dust, you know. But even though it's a bit unpleasant, it is actually not inherently poisonous or deadly, right?

It's not like they put some magic potion in it. So the water itself is not magical. And any swelling or miscarriage were it to occur would have to be as a direct intervention by the Lord because He alone knows the truth of whether this woman is faithful or not.

In fact, the punishment will probably have ongoing effect. So, you know, it's like even after the water passes through the body and, you know, whatever was in it has come through, God will still be falling through on the punishment if this woman was unfaithful.

[15:04] Now, all this to say that actually this practice is no longer relevant to us anymore. So we shouldn't be practicing this, right? But what we're meant to see is just how important relational purity is to God, particularly faithfulness in marriage.

And what we also see is that this purity is not just related to the married couple themselves, but actually impacts the purity of the entire camp. Just as sin in our midst today, whether it's between just two people or by ourselves, it does not just impact us, but actually has an impact on the whole church and the whole congregation because we're part of the one body of Christ.

And of course, if adultery has not occurred, then what is also being provided here is a means by which the mistrust in the marriage can be allowed to be dispelled, isn't it?

Because the man now knows that, yep, she hasn't been unfaithful, and therefore the marriage is restored in that sense. And hopefully as well, by God providing this ahead of time, it should act as a deterrent for any contemplated or temptation to adultery, right?

Because a man or woman, knowing that even if they're not found out that this test could be applied to them, well, they should think twice, shouldn't they? Before they engage in conduct that causes immorality and impurity.

[16:37] So for us as well, we need to know that God sees everything. As the writer in Hebrews 4, verse 13 says, nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight.

Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account. And so, friends, let us not even think that any of our sin, even though hidden, is hidden from God's sight.

Many of you will remember recently that Kiss Cam at that Coldplay concert. Yep. God's sight is more penetrating even than that. He sees everything.

Nothing escapes Him. And one day, all of us will have to give an account for it. Now, of course, thanks be to God, we have the blood of Jesus to purify us from all the things that we've done wrong. But that should not make us then complacent and blasé about the sins that we commit, nor the sins we try to hide because God sees it. Now, lastly, we get to then what I call devotional purity.

[17:45] And that comes in the form of a Nazarite vow. And again, it's not as if at first we're talking about sin in terms of wrongdoing, but the Nazarite practices here show how important purity is to God.

And in this case, the importance of a person's word to God, that telling lies makes a person, not telling lies, but not fulfilling your vows, letting God down, is something that actually impacts purity. Now, I think how this scenario normally occurs is that, and you know we know these things, that sometimes we are so eager for God to answer our prayer in some shape or form that we might say, Lord, if you answer me this, right, I will dedicate my life to this or that or whatever, or I will do this or that for you.

And the Lord says that once an Israelite makes such a vow, it is important for them to go through with it and fulfill it.

No ifs or buts. You know, no saying, oh God, I know I did say I was going to do this, but I forgot that actually, you know, my mom wanted me to do this instead or my dad said, I had to, no.

[19:00] Once you've made a vow, God says, fulfill them. And that's because that is how God is himself. He is a God who keeps his promises.

No ifs, no buts. And so he would like, he demands that his people follow in his footsteps. So we read in verse 1 then, chapter 6, speak to the Israelites and say to them, if a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of dedication to the Lord as a Nazarite, they must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or other fermented drink.

They must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins. Now, it's not exactly specified what is a special vow but because it's called a vow of dedication, it appears to involve dedicating one's life to the Lord.

And again, the length of period for this vow is not stated but it sort of presumes that it's not ongoing, that there is a finite length of time. But for however long it may be, then three things are stipulated. First, the Nazarite is to abstain from alcohol or fermented drink. Second, they're not to shave their head because in verse 5 it says there in verse 5 and this stipulation is similar to the priest back in Leviticus because they too dedicated their life to the work of the tabernacle and therefore they were not allowed to shave their heads as well.

[20:30] And allowing the hair to grow long is really a visible sign, a symbol of their dedication to the Lord. And so it would be that as they walked around in the community people would see that they have not put the razor to the head and therefore recognize that these people are people that are dedicated to the Lord.

Now thirdly, like the priest, they are not to go near a dead body as well, even if it's a close relative, father, mother or sibling. And this we see in verse 6.

And again, as such, this is not an immoral thing by going near a dead body but it makes the person ceremonially unclean. So it's akin to what happens in chapter 5 and verse 2 when someone comes into contact with a dead body.

Now, in verse 9 to 12 then, what is described is what happens if they accidentally do, not on purpose. So if someone dies suddenly in the Nazarite's presence, thus defiling the hair that symbolizes their dedication, they must shave their head on the seventh day, the day of their cleansing.

Now, if you put this and chapter 5 and verse 3 together, I think what happens is that if they accidentally come into the presence of a dead person, then I think the Nazarite will, based on chapter 5 verse 3, have to leave and go outside the camp immediately, probably for the first seven days.

[21 : 58] and then on the seventh day, they are then to shave their head as a sign of their cleansing. And then, after that, bring a sacrifice to the tent of meeting.

So verse 11, that same day they are to consecrate their head again. They must rededicate themselves to the Lord for the same period of dedication and must bring a year-old male lamb as a guilt offering.

The previous days do not count because they became defiled during their period of dedication. In other words, what happens is that the clock resets, right?

And the timing of the vow starts again. Now, can you imagine just how demoralizing that is going to be? Let's say you made a vow for a year and then three days before the end of the year, you accidentally, well, actually, maybe you visited your parent who was elderly and they suddenly died on you.

Imagine that. You're going to have to start all over again for a whole year. It reminds me of those challenges on Survivor. I've got to put this one in.

[23 : 09] You know, that immunity challenge. You know, that final block, putting that I and then as you're stepping back and it falls over, what does Jeff say? Not this Jeff, but the Jeff on the show.

You have to start all over. So demoralizing, isn't it? So heartbreaking. But I think that's the point, isn't it? God is illustrating just how hard, if not impossible, yes, it's actually impossible, it is to maintain purity.

And all throughout the examples that we have over these two chapters, the question is not if, but when impurity occurs. Now, some of this is physical and ceremonial, but all of them point to the impossibility of a person or Israel as a whole keeping their own hearts pure before the Lord.

That's not possible because we all sin. Whether it's hateful thoughts or lust or idolatry, God is really helping them to be sensitively aware that maintaining purity in His sight is actually impossible.

And God knows this. That's why even as He's described why people become unclean or defiled, He provides a way for them to be cleansed, whether ritually or else through burnt sacrifices at the tabernacle to atone for their sin.

[24 : 39] And of course, as we've been hearing and going through numbers, we know that although the tabernacle was essential for God's presence with them, ultimately for Israel, that proved to be ineffective, wasn't it?

Imperfect. Sort of just a placeholder until Jesus, who can truly purify us, came and died for us on the cross. And that's why Titus told us in our other reading in chapter 2, verse 11, that for Christians, the grace of God that is in Christ has appeared that offers salvation to all people. And not only that, it teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age while we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and then, as we're on the topic of purity today, to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

And so we know that it's only the blood of Jesus that can truly purify us to come into and live in God's presence. But at the same time, Titus also tells us that by God's grace, God has also given us the means to say no to ungodliness and worldly passion.

In fact, he's given us the means to be eager to do what is good, to desire what is good. And of course, we're by no means perfect, and so the blood of Jesus continues to purify us from all wrongdoing, past, present, and future.

[26 : 23] But we know, don't we? We continue to know that it's so easy for us to slip up. The impure thoughts that run through our minds, whether it's jealousy or bitterness or anger against others, and on top of that, it's so easy to accidentally, unintentionally, isn't it, fall into sin.

Because why? We're self-centered. We're self-focused. I know that sometimes I'm so concentrated on doing, focused on getting something done, that I end up actually being inconsiderate to others. Right? You just have to be on the road. You need to get from A to B and you're running three or four minutes late and before you know it, you've just been inconsiderate to the drivers around you. Right? But that's where God's grace comes in. Because even when God knew that Israel was not going to live up to His standard of purity, God was still willing to provide a way through the tabernacle, through restitutions, through cleansing, and ultimately for us through the Lord Jesus, so that He then can continue to bless us.

And so we spend five or six chapters, haven't we, looking at how God is in their midst, but He's holy and He requires them to obey Him and perform various things, including what we've looked at today.

[27 : 50] And yet, at the end of all these six chapters, even though He knows that we will fall short, Israel will fall short, He provides an assurance of His blessing and goodwill through His priest, Aaron.

And so that's what we have at the end in verses 22 to 27. He says, tell Aaron and his sons, this is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them, the Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace. So they, that is Aaron and his sons, will put my name, God's name, God's holy name, on the Israelites and I will bless them.

And notice what this blessing is. It's not fortune and riches, but the Lord will keep you. That is, watch over you and keep you safe. The Lord will be gracious to you that despite your failings, there will always be a way back to God in repentance.

And He will give you peace. That is, there will always be forgiveness and reconciliation offered to His people. And that, of course, is the same for us through Jesus.

[29 : 03] So, keeping the kitchen clean is a never-ending work in progress, isn't it? And it's a bit like our lives, isn't it? Our lives of purity and godliness will be an ongoing work in progress.

But we know that, we do it knowing that because of Jesus, God's face continually shines on us and His blessing is forever upon us.

And He wants us to keep going so that one day we will be truly in His glorious presence forever. And at that time, there will be true purity and true cleanliness, not just externally, but also in our hearts forever.

Let's pray. Father, You are the judge of our hearts, the secrets of our hearts, and You are able to know exactly what's in there. So please, Lord, search our hearts and see if there's any offensive and impure way in us.

Humble us to come continually to the cross in repentance, but thank You that through the grace that has appeared in Christ, we are able to live more and more in line with the purity that Christ has achieved for us.

[30 : 19] Make us eager to do what is good. Teach us to say no to all ungodliness and worldly passions. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Amen.