

Living as God's Holy People

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[0:00] How about I pray for us and then we'll get into it. Heavenly Father, thanks so much for your word, the Bible. I thank you, although, that these words were written to Israel thousands of years ago, that they still contain truth for us, that is helpful for us to live as your people.

And so far we pray that you would help us to understand your word and more than that, to live in light of it. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, our son, Tim, has a friend at school who has a very distinct set of taste buds.

So, for example, he does not like chocolate, which, you know, I've met a couple of those before. It's a bit unusual, though. But his favourite food is haggis flavoured chips.

Yeah. And for dessert, tomato sauce on ice cream. Now, they're pretty distinct food preferences, aren't they? And they really set him apart from all his friends at school.

He's the only one who likes haggis flavoured chips. In fact, you could say that his food preferences make him distinct or even holy. Because that's what the word holy means, right?

[1:20] Distinct. Set apart. Or take yesterday, I went lawn bowling out at Richmond with some guys, some of whom are from this congregation. And there was one guy who was wearing pink shorts.

So, I think we've got a slide on him. There he is. I think we've got a nice up-close shot of the next. There he is. Nice shorts, Booth. By the way, Booth did give me permission to use his shorts.

But let me tell you that there was absolutely no one else in the whole club, male or female, wearing pink shorts like this. And you could say these shorts made Booth distinct.

Set him apart from everyone else. Made him holy. Because that's what the word holy means. It means to be set apart or distinct. Of course, when it comes to God, he is the supreme example of holiness.

His whole character is set apart from others. There is no one like him. So, on the next slide, from Isaiah 40, we read this. God says, To whom will you compare me?

[2:28] Or who is my equal? Says the Holy One. You see, God is the very definition of holiness. Because he is the most distinct person there is.

How is he distinct? Well, he is more powerful than anyone else. And he is more righteous, perfect, as Jeff was saying in the kids talk, than anyone else.

He is in a league of his own, literally. But you see, this is what it means to be holy. It means to be distinct. Set apart. And for God, it means to be more powerful than anyone else.

And more perfect in righteousness, goodness, than anyone else. Now, why am I telling you all this? Well, because holiness is really the big idea of our passage today. As most of you know, we've been working our way through Deuteronomy.

And today we've come to all these bizarre food laws. But behind these laws is the idea of holiness. And you can see it, by the way, our passage begins and ends with holiness.

- [3 : 29] Have a look at your Bibles there. And have a look at verse number two. It says, Moses says to Israel, you are a people, notice, holy to the Lord your God.
- Distinct, set apart for the Lord your God. Or have a look at the end of the passage, at the bottom of the page, verse 21. Actually, sorry, it goes over the top of the next page.
- At the end of verse 21, it says, but you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Do you see how the passage begins and ends with this idea of holiness?
- And so that's the big idea of the passage. Behind all these strange food laws is actually the theme of holiness. For as I said, Moses begins and ends by reminding Israel that they are holy to the Lord.
- In the words of verse 2, God has chosen them out of all the peoples on earth. He has set them apart. Saved them from Egypt.
- [4 : 31] Made them his holy people. His treasured possession, verse 2 says. And not because they deserved it, but because of God's kindness, grace, mercy. But now that God has already made them his holy people, already made them set apart from all the peoples on the earth, then they are to act like it.
- They are to act as though they are set apart from the peoples of the earth and for the Lord their God. They are to live out their identity as God's holy people. How? Well, firstly, by not mourning like the nations.
- Point one on your outlines, verse one in your Bibles. You are the children of the Lord your God. Do not cut yourselves or shave the front of your heads for the dead. I doubt any of us would be tempted to do this.
- And when someone dies, I conducted a funeral just last week. And there was no one at the funeral who had a bald spot where their fringe used to be. Because they shaved their head. But it seems this and cutting yourself was the practice of the nations around them.
- And so in the Bible, we read that the prophets of Baal would cut themselves to try and get the Baal idol or statue to do something. You might even remember the story of Elijah and the Baal prophets, where they had this big barbecue competition to see which God would send down fire to cook the cow.
- [5 : 55] The Baal prophets danced around and cut themselves to try and twist Baal's arm to do something. In this case, to send down fire. And nothing happened, of course.
- Well, it seems it was also a practice of cutting yourself to try and twist your God's arm to accept your dead loved one. But Israel is not to do this. I mean, verse one reminds them that they were already God's children.
- God already loves them and wants to act for their good. They don't need to twist God's arm to start with. But the main reason they are not to mourn like the nations is verse two.
- Do you see? Verse two starts with the word for or because you are a people holy to the Lord your God. You see, they already set apart from the nations.
- And so they are not to act like the nations, but they act differently to them. Be distinct by not mourning like them. And the second way they had to live out their identity as God's holy people was by not eating detestable things, but only what God has chosen.
- [7 : 00] So point to verse three. He says, Do not eat any detestable thing. These are the animals you may eat. The ox, the sheep, the goat, the deer, the gazelle, the roe deer, the wild goat, the ibex.
- I forgot to look that up. I'm not sure what that is. But anyway, the antelope and the mountain sheep. You may eat any animal that has a divided or split hoof and that chews the cud.

However, of those that chew the cud or that have a divided hoof, you may not eat the camel, the rabbit or the hyrax. Although they chew the cud, they do not have a divided hoof. They are ceremonially unclean for you.

The pig is also unclean, although it has a divided hoof. It does not chew the cud. You are not to eat their meat or touch their carcasses. This list here starts in verse three with the command, Do not eat any detestable thing.

Now, I don't think the detestable things are the animals listed in the following verses, because at the end of verse seven, they're actually given a different name. Notice the end of verse seven, they're called ceremonially unclean, not detestable.

[8:08] Rather, the word detestable is always used in association of false worship, worshipping other gods. So if you just keep your hand in chapter 14 and just turn back a page to the end of chapter 12, we saw it there last week.

So just turn back a page to the end of chapter 12, verse number 31. Notice what Moses said there, You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, the nation's way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of, notice, detestable things the Lord hates.

They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods. You see, the word detestable refers to those things involved in worshipping other gods.

And so I think when in chapter 14, verse three, what Moses is really talking about is, don't eat those animals that are sacrificed to other gods. We've learned earlier on in our series that God is going to drive the nations out slowly for their good.

But it means there will still be false worship around, still idol worship around. And so Israel could, if they wanted, get involved with that false worship, eat those false sacrifices and so on.

[9:27] But God says, don't get involved. Don't eat those detestable things. Rather, be set apart from the nations and for God and only eat the animals that have a split hoof or chew the cud.

Does anyone know what chewing the cud means, by the way? No? Yeah, that's right. Yeah, they kind of swallow food and bring it back up and then chew it.

Yeah, it's gross. Yeah. But that's what cows do and the animals listed there do. But if the animal does not have both, the split hoof and chew the cud, then they cannot eat it.

They have to have both. Now, is there some health reason for all this? And some people think that. No. I mean, pork is not, you know, the ads, pork, the other white meat, you know, full of protein.

It's not bad for you if you're eating in moderation. But Israel could not eat it. And if they eat too much cow, too much red meat, then it's not good for the digestive system either. So it's got nothing to do with health.

[10:33] So why could they eat some and not others? Well, because God was making them distinct, you see. He was giving them a distinct cuisine to remind them that they are distinct or holy people and to help them live like it.

And let me play a game with you for a moment. I'm going to say a dish. And I want you to tell me what people group or culture it comes from. Ready? So the first one, butter chicken.

India. Okay. Next one, pad thai. Thai. All right. Okay, next one. Bangers and mash. English.

Next one, meat pie. Well, I've got to play. Aussie, of course. And what about that last one? Dumplings. Chinese. Yeah. The point is we can recognize a culture from their cuisine, can't we?

Or put differently, food makes a culture distinctive, set apart, so much so that you can recognize the people group instantly. And that's what Israel's food laws were to do.

[11:43] It wasn't about what was more healthy or not. It was about teaching them that they are a distinct or holy people set apart from the nations and for God. And by following these food laws, it was reminding them who they were, that they were God's holy people.

And so Moses continues, this time without fish. Have a look at verse 9. He says, Of all the creatures living in the water, you may eat anything that has fins and scales, but if anything does not have one of them, you know, either fins or scales, then you may not eat.

For you, it is unclean. And so they can eat salmon and barramundi, but octopus and prawns are a no-go. I don't know if you've ever eaten octopus.

I have. It's very rubbery. But Israel could not eat it. Yeah, calamari. Now, was God saying, no calamari and octopus because I want to protect you from rubbery food?

Nope. He was teaching them that they were his holy people. And in some sense, God's choice of what to eat and not to eat is actually a bit random. I mean, the next list is even a little bit more random.

[12:53] So in verse 11, you may eat any clean bird, but these ones you cannot eat. You know, the eagle, the vulture, the black vulture, and on it goes. I'm not going to read it all out.

And even the bat. I don't think I'd ever try a bat, but anyway. Not to eat those birds. You can eat the clean ones, but not those ones I've listed.

And notice there's no particular grouping. I mean, some people try and think, oh, well, there are birds of prey, but there are some birds of prey missing. But there's no particular grouping. Not like with animals where it's split hoof and chew the cud or fish where it was fins and scales.

For birds, it's just this list chosen by God. God has chosen some and not others. And I suspect this chosen list of foods was meant to remind Israel that God had chosen them, verse 2.

God had chosen them to be his treasured possession, his people. You see, these somewhat random food laws would remind them who they are as God's holy people.

[13:56] And so help them to live it out. And this is what Moses returns to in verse 21.3. He says, Do not eat anything you find already dead.

You may give it to the foreigner residing in any of your towns, and they may eat it, or you may sell it to any foreigner. But you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk.

Well, here they are not to eat anything they find already dead, but they can give it to a foreigner. Now, it sounds like Moses is saying, look, just give the foreigners the garbage on the ground.

But that's not what it's talking about. It's referring to meat that is still good enough to eat, that hasn't been dead long. Kind of like our 10-second rule. If we drop something, not long, we can pick it up and eat it.

It's kind of like that. Because it seems Israel would have eaten it themselves. It would have been good enough for them to eat. That's why Moses has to give them the law in the first place. And so, this law does two things.

[15:00] First, it makes sure you don't waste meat that you could have eaten. But more importantly, it draws a distinction between Israel and the foreigner, you see. The law, again, is about Israel being different, distinct, set apart, wholly from foreigners for God.

And I take it, this is what the last commandment is also about. And not cooking a young goat in its mother's milk, which just seems plain wrong anyway. I mean, using milk that normally gives life to a young goat to instead bring its death seems a bit macabre, a bit contrary to God's design.

But this command is singled out here. It's a bit odd. It just kind of hangs there on its own, doesn't it? What's more, this command is given two more times in Exodus. So, it seems to be a bit of a big deal.

It seems to be something, perhaps, that the nations were doing, like cutting themselves back in verse 1. And so, while the choice of foods in the middle of the passage seems a bit random, the commands at the beginning and the end seem to be deliberate references to foreign or pagan practices.

And Israel was to avoid them. Either way, all these laws were meant to teach Israel that they are God's holy people, his treasured possession, whom he has saved and set apart from the nations for him.

[16:18] And the food laws were only part of living as God's holy people. And as they obeyed them, it would remind them of who they are. The problem was, they still forgot, or rather ignored, who they were.

So, instead of being set apart from the nations and living for God, they ended up becoming like the nations and worshipping their gods. In short, they persisted in sin and forced God to judge them.

But you see, God still wants a holy people, a people who will be his treasured possession. And so, he sent his son, Jesus, to take the judgment for our sin.

And as we heard in our second reading, those who come to him, the living stone, that's Jesus, well, we are made holy. We are set apart. Not because we deserve it, but because of God's mercy.

So, on the next slide, remember what Peter said from the second reading? He says, You see, by believing in Jesus, we become part of God's chosen people, part of God's special or treasured possession.

[17:55] Which is extraordinary when you think about it. Out of the billions of stars and the multitude of planets, out of the beauty of creation and even the millions of people, God says to you, You're my favourite.

My treasured possession. It's extraordinary, isn't it? But it is only for those who believe in Jesus. Because if you don't, if you're still rejecting Jesus, then you cannot be God's treasured possession, his children.

So, do believe if you don't. God longs to have you as one of his favourites. But for us who do, then, we have become part of God's chosen, treasured people, part of his holy nation.

This is who we are now. God's chosen and holy people. And so we have to live out who we are. How? Do we wear pink shorts?

No. Although, boof, feel free to do so. Or do we have to follow those food laws in our passage today? Well, no.

[19:06] As we saw a couple of weeks ago, Jesus has fulfilled all those Old Testament laws. What's more, those laws were only there to help Israel remember that they were God's holy people.

We have something much better to help us remember now. God has given us his spirit, who works in our conscience and heart. I mean, have you ever caught yourself thinking, oh, I should really do that, or as a Christian, I shouldn't do this?

That's God's spirit, working your conscience, your heart, helping you remember who you are, so you can live it out. And so, how are we to live out our identity as God's holy people?

Well, by our behavior and desires, being distinct from the world, the nations, and set apart for God. As Peter also says on the next slide, a little bit earlier on, he says, As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do. For it is written, be holy because I am holy.

[20 : 14] Now, put simply, if we are God's holy people, then we need to live like our holy God, who is righteous and good. Peter says, We are not to follow our evil desires like the nations and live selfish lives.

Instead, we are to obey God and live His way. This is how we are to be distinct from the nations and for God. And so the question is, are we doing that?

I mean, do our lives even look distinct from the world? Are they different? Sadly, for some Christians, there is absolutely no distinction between how they live and how the world lives.

But if we believe in Jesus, then we are God's holy people. We treasure possession. We are distinct. And so we are to show it by living lives that are distinct from the world around us, set apart for God.

My dad taught for many years in a public high school and in the staff room, it was common for the teachers to tell really crude jokes and sometimes even about their students that they didn't like.

[21 : 23] And my dad, when they started, would just leave the staff room as soon as he realized it was going to be rude or crude. He was the only one in the whole staff that didn't join in who was in the room.

Why? He was one of God's holy people. He believed in Jesus. And so he was going to live it out by being distinct from the staff room, if you like, from the world.

And instead, live to please God. They ridiculed him for being a Christian and a wowser. But after about two years, they ended up just stopped telling the joke when dad walked in the staff room.

You see, he'd lived out his holiness. He was clearly distinct, set apart from the world and for God who saved him. Or even yesterday at Lawn Bowls, I was encouraged because not only did Boof's pink shorts set us apart, but so did the language of the church guys.

I mean, around us were other groups playing Lawn Bowls and I could hear all kinds of other things that you wouldn't repeat in front of kids. But in our group, I heard conversation about everyday life and the footy and things like that, but also God talk.

[22 : 32] In fact, at one point, one guy called out across the green, oh, Jesus didn't just die for you, mate. Now that set him apart, didn't it? That made him distinct.

You see, there are all sorts of ways we are to live out our identity as God's holy people. And we are to do so because of what he has done for us. He's given us his son. He's already made us holy, already set us apart, already made us his treasured possessions.

And so we are to act like it by living lives that are in the world, yes, but set apart from it. Lives that seek to be holy like God is holy.

For in his mercy, God has saved us and made us his treasured possession, which is extraordinary. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we do thank you for your mercy towards us.

That although we don't deserve it, we deserve to do the time for the crime, so to speak. Yet you give your only son, Jesus, to die in our place, to take the punishment for our sins so that we don't have to.

[23 : 45] And in fact, then make us part of your treasured possession, part of your holy people. And so father, given what you've done for us and who we are, help us, we pray, to live out our lives as your holy people.

May we be distinct from the world around us. May people notice it and ask us why. And may we be able to tell them of the Lord Jesus who offers them life eternal too.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.