

Cleanness and Food - Leviticus 11

To Read:

1. Genesis 2:15-16, Genesis 3
2. Genesis 9:1-17, Acts 10

I. Introduction

A. This morning we're starting the third section of Leviticus

1. But first, let's step back and remember what Leviticus is about - Leviticus is answering the question, "how can Israel dwell with a holy God?" And, as we apply it to ourselves, "how can we dwell with a holy God?"
2. And, if we put our outline up on the screen, we're still in the first half of the book, Judicial Holiness, dealing with the question, "how do we become holy?"
3. A couple of months ago, we finished the first section that dealt with the sacrifices that would atone for sin, and a couple of weeks ago we finished the second section that deals with the inauguration and purpose of the priesthood
4. If you'll recall from a couple of weeks ago when we left off in Leviticus, the last passage we looked at described a second purpose for the priesthood - to represent God to His people
5. The central verses for this purpose were Leviticus 10:10-11 - *You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses.*
6. The priests were to distinguish between the clean and the unclean and to teach Israel about the clean and the unclean - but what is clean and what is unclean? To this point in Leviticus, or in the Torah, that hasn't really been defined - so what are the priests supposed to teach Israel?

B. This morning we are going to start the third section, reminders of holiness, and we're going to see what the priests were supposed to teach Israel

1. This section of Leviticus is very closely tied to Leviticus 10 because it describes what clean and unclean means - it describes what the priests are to teach to Israel
2. So we hear a repeated phrase throughout this section that ties back to Leviticus 10:
 - a. Leviticus 11:46-47 - *This is the law about beast and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms on the ground, to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten.*
 - b. Leviticus 13:59 - *This is the law for a case of leprous disease in a garment of wool or linen, either in the warp or the woof, or in any article made of skin, to determine whether it is clean or unclean.*
 - c. Leviticus 14:54-57 - *This is the law for any case of leprous disease: for an itch, for leprous disease in a garment or in a house, and for a swelling or an eruption or a spot, to show when it is unclean and when it is clean. This is the law for leprous disease.*
 - d. Leviticus 15:31-33 - *Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.*
3. Leviticus 11-15 is a handbook for the priests so that they can fulfil their purpose and teach Israel the difference between the holy and the common, between the clean and the unclean, and we see four sections here:
 - a. Cleanness and Food - Leviticus 11
 - b. Cleanness and Childbirth - Leviticus 12
 - c. Cleanness and Skin Disease - Leviticus 13-14
 - d. Cleanness and Reproduction - Leviticus 15

C. This morning, let's start in Leviticus 11 - if you have your Bibles turn with me there and we'll read it together

- D. **Proposition:** The dietary laws separated Israel from the nations which calls us to rejoice in Christ's fulfillment of these laws and to separate ourselves to Him.
 1. What did it teach the ancient Israelites about God?
 2. How should this point us to Christ?
 3. How should this be applied to the New Testament believer?

1 II. What did this teach the ancient Israelites about God?

1 A. What is clean and unclean?

1. I don't know about you, but clean and unclean have always been categories that are at least a little mysterious to me - we understand some things about them, but trying to define exactly what these categories mean sometimes leaves us at a loss
 - a. I imagine that most of us can agree that clean and unclean are not moral categories - something that is unclean is not necessarily sinful (although it might be) - and we can see this because sometimes normal bodily functions are the subject of cleanliness and diseases as well, over which we have no control
 - b. But that just leaves us with a negative definition - these aren't moral categories - and we might struggle to give a positive description as to what these rules are
 - c. And though these categories are not moral categories, obedience to these laws was a moral imperative - these are not moral categories but obedience to them is a moral issue, which only further confuses the question
 - d. And I'll admit this morning that I am not, perhaps, the most qualified to teach on this - I find these laws mysterious as well, in some ways I can feel their meaning, but putting it into words is hard
 - e. So, to some degree, I'm going to say that I'm not entirely sure what the depth of the meaning of clean and unclean are - I'm sure others could do a better job describing this and I'm sure all of us could spend a lifetime studying these things and continually profit
 - f. But because this is God's Word for us, I want to try to walk away this morning with some understanding of what these cleanliness laws are about
- 1 2. I think the first positive statement we can make about the cleanliness laws is that they are intimately associated with the sanctuary
 - a. God's people need to be clean because God's sanctuary, the Tabernacle, the place where He dwells amidst His people is in their midst - and the closer they are to the sanctuary the cleaner they have to be
- 1 3. Also, second, the cleanliness laws have to do with the concept of corruption
 - a. God's sanctuary cannot be stained by corruption so those who dwell around the sanctuary and especially those who enter the sanctuary cannot be marked by corruption
 - b. This concept of corruption is important - it isn't synonymous with sin but it is related to sin
 - c. Corruption is anything that is dirty, anything that has failed, anything that can be associated with sickness and death and destruction, anything that displays the loss of God's good creation
 - d. So corruption isn't sin but it is a result of sin though not usually tied to specific sins
- 1 4. Third, clean and unclean can be very visible categories which is where the cleanliness laws come in
 - a. Often the effects of sin, that is corruption, can be much more easily seen than sin itself
 - b. So God's holiness can be displayed well by contrasting His cleanliness, His separation from the effects of sin, to our uncleanness, our corruption through the stain of sin
 - c. The cleanliness laws highlight this truth - God is holy, He is perfect, He is incorruptible and therefore those who approach Him must be cleansed from their corruption
- 1 5. Fourth, because clean and unclean can be very visible categories, they can serve as good types for teaching
 - a. In other words, these categories can help display eternal truths without being eternal demands - these laws were meant to display the holiness of God in easily understood pictures that will help us understand the less well seen truths
 - b. So, these cleanliness laws are not binding to the New Testament Christian, and many of these laws were specifically and emphatically set aside in the New Testament, but the truth that these laws displayed is still true today - and our goal in studying these sections is to find that truth, how can these pictures help us understand God's holiness and how we need to approach God?

1 B. Why were different animals considered clean or unclean?

1. Commentators throughout history have tried to understand the reasoning behind why some animals were considered clean and others unclean, and several ideas have been proposed
 - 1 a. One of the oldest understandings is based on creative allegory - that somehow the characteristics of the animals described were supposed to teach us something about ourselves, for example, chewing the cud means we need to be meditative people - the problem is that nowhere in Scripture are the dietary laws treated that way and trying to force each animal into an allegorical tale starts to be a stretch
 - 1 b. Another understanding is based on characteristic abnormality - that the characteristics of the clean animals were normal and the characteristics of the unclean animals are aberrant and corrupt and therefore abhorrent to God - this can be somewhat more compelling, but it seems to ignore the Genesis account where all animals are created good, assuredly sin has corrupted, but sin would tend to corrupt all animals, not some animals - and also, how are characteristics defined as normal or abnormal?
 - 1 c. A recent understanding informed by archeological studies are based on cultic practices - especially related to pigs, this makes a lot of sense; pigs were often used in the worship of underworld deities in the surrounding cultures and so they would be out-of-bounds for God's people - again, this makes a lot of sense, but also ignores the fact that some clean animals, for example the bull, were the representatives of deities in surrounding cultures as well; why were some cults out-of-bounds, but not others?
 - 1 d. One of the most popular understandings is based on community health - God was guarding the Israelites from diseases by forbidding them to eat certain animals that were disease reservoirs - again this can be compelling, but in the end the science doesn't bear out; the animals that are clean are just as often disease reservoirs and there would have been much more direct ways of influencing community health - plus it ignores the fact that by the New Testament all these animals are declared clean - does God not care about His people's health anymore?
2. One of the challenges in understanding these laws is that there is no reason given
 - a. The text doesn't give a reason for why God declared some animals clean and some animals unclean and none of the proposed reasons have ever really fit
 - 1 b. So I'm going to conclude this question by saying, "I don't know" - I don't know why God chose the bull, goat, sheep, etc. to be clean and the pig to be unclean - but perhaps that's the point, as we'll see in a few minutes, perhaps we're not supposed to be searching for an organizing principle
 - c. But first, I want to try to understand in what context the ancient Israelites would have understood these commands - would their first impulse been to have tried to understand the categories?

1 C. How would the ancient Israelites have understood these commands?

1. I think one of our challenges in understanding the dietary laws is that we often think of them out of context, but I think context, especially canonical context, is really important here
 - a. The food laws are given as part of the Torah and they actually make a lot of connections to other, earlier parts of the Torah
 - b. A good Israelite listening to the stories of Genesis and Exodus should have started to make connections to these other stories and to understand the dietary laws in light of these stories
 - c. So I want to look at two of the major stories that give context to the dietary laws
2. The first context is a contrast with the end of the flood narrative
 - a. This isn't the first time in the Torah that dietary guidelines have been given - as we read earlier this morning, after the flood God speaks to Noah and tells him that all animals are clean
 - b. And there is a strong parallel between Genesis 9 and Leviticus 11 even in the categories that are given
 - 1 ✗ c. Leviticus 11 is broken into four categories: land animals (1-8), water animals (9-12), air animals (13-23), and swarming things (29-45)
 - 1 ✗ d. These are the same four categories (with the same Hebrew words), found in Genesis 9:2 - *The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered.*
 - e. The observant Israelite would need to understand the dietary laws within the Noahic command which declared all animals fit for human consumption - but what would this teach the Israelites?
 - 1 f. First, the Israelites should have understood that these laws were not declarations of things that are inherently evil because God had declared them good and fit for consumption already - there is something else going on here

- 1 g. Second, the Israelites should have understood these laws in light of the table of nations in the next chapter of Genesis - the command to Noah had been for all mankind, for every nation on the earth - but they were a special nation, a people for God's own possession and these dietary laws would set them apart from every other nation on the earth
- h. The observant Israelite should have had some concept that the purpose of these laws was not 'moral' per say, but rather to make a distinction - to set off Israel from among the nations as a peculiar people
- i. And this is exactly what the dietary laws did - in fact, archeologists even today can often identify Jewish settlements based on what food stuff was present - their diet separated them in visible, tangible ways from the nations around them
- 3. The second context goes back even farther with a comparison with the command in the garden
 - 1 a. A dietary law had existed from the very beginning of mankind, and we even see a lot of the same words from Leviticus 11 in Genesis 2 and 3, so let's read Genesis 2:15-17 - *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*
 - b. Using the same phraseology as Leviticus, God says, "these are all the things you can eat, except..." and in this first command it was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil
 - c. And like in Leviticus, no clear reason was given other than the command of God - and that was the primary purpose of this command, it was an opportunity to obey, to show love for God through obedience to His word even without clear reason
 - 1 d. The observant Israelite should have had some concept that the purpose of these dietary laws was much the same - they were an opportunity to obey even if reasons were not given
 - e. And that's why I say that perhaps trying to understand why certain animals were clean or unclean may be missing the point - I'm sure there are reasons why God wanted them to choose some and not others, but the main point was obedience not understanding

1 D. So what is the primary purpose of these commands?

- 1. I think we can see from understanding these laws in context that their purpose is primarily theological, not practical
 - a. This doesn't deny that there may have been real, practical benefits from these laws that God in His wisdom ordained, and I think there was, but that those practical benefits are not the main point
 - b. Instead the main point is those two concepts that are gleaned from context - distinction and obedience
- 1 2. The dietary laws were designed to make a distinction
 - a. The Israelites were a called out people that were made holy to the Lord their God
 - b. This meant that they could no longer be the same as the world - if they were called out to God they were called out of the world and they could no longer be part of it in the same way that they were before
 - c. And their distinction from the world needed to be visible, to be tangible, the world needed to see that God's people were different because God was different and God's people needed to be reminded never to go back to the world but to remain a separate people
 - d. The dietary laws effected that in Israel and called the faithful Israelite to ponder these things - I am part of a called out people
- 1 3. And the dietary laws were designed to demand obedience
 - a. If Israel belonged to God as a special people then they owed God their unquestioning obedience - not in the sense of unthinking, foolish obedience, but in an absolutely trusting obedience
 - b. He was their Lord and Master, He knew what was best and what was necessary and if He said that these things were good to eat and other things were an abomination then they should obey - even without reason
 - c. They didn't need to understand God's purposes, they didn't need to know how the animals ended up on the lists, they needed to trust God and obey His command
 - d. The dietary laws were an opportunity for Israel to rejoice in obedience and called the faithful Israelite to ponder these things - my life should be marked by absolute obedience
- 1 4. In sum, the dietary laws taught Israel that their God was holy and therefore they had to be distinct: in identity and obedience
 - a. And this is exactly where the passage leads us this morning, Leviticus 11:44 - *For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.*

1 E. Kid's Question: What do the food laws in Leviticus teach us?

- 3 1. Answer: That our God is holy so we need to be distinct and we need to be obedient

1 III. How should this point us to Christ?

1 A. Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of the dietary laws

1. The dietary laws called Israel to be separate and to be obedient, but in the end they only produced a superficial distinction and a superficial obedience - the dietary laws longed for someone who would not fulfill merely the letter but also the spirit of the law
2. So when Jesus appeared, proclaiming that He was the fulfillment of the law, we should expect to see Him live out the purpose of these laws - to be distinct and to be obedient
- 1 1 3. So Jesus came proclaiming His distinctness, John 8:23 - *He said to them, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world." - Jesus claimed that He was separate, distinct, not of this world and His life bore that out, He was different, so different that the world hated Him, that the world destroyed Him*
- 1 1 4. And Hebrews celebrates Jesus' separateness, Hebrews 7:26 - *For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.* - although Jesus came and dwelt among us, He was not contaminated, sin and its effects were foreign to Him
- 1 1 5. And Philippians celebrates Jesus' unwavering obedience, the obedience that would even lead Him to death, Philippians 2:8 - *And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*
6. Jesus was born under the dietary laws and lived under them, but more than merely obeying their rule, He lived out their purpose perfectly - He was the perfect fulfillment of the law, He was what the law longed for

1 B. Jesus is the perfect end of the dietary laws

1. The dietary laws did fulfill their purpose in Israel very well - they made Israel a very distinct people and they made a significant separation between the Jews and the Gentiles, emphasizing that the Gentiles were not God's people
2. So the dietary laws, on their own, actually stand against us here this morning - we are not Israel, we were not called as God's people, we have no place in God's sanctuary
3. So this morning we should not only see that Jesus is the fulfillment of the dietary laws but also their end, in fulfilling their purpose He has brought the shadow to an end and welcomed the Gentiles to be part of His people
- 1 3 4. So we read the story of Peter and Cornelius this morning where the dietary laws were specifically set aside, and Paul expounds on this truth in Ephesians 2:11-17 - *Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.*
5. Jesus fulfilled the dietary laws and brought them to an end - they no longer separate us from God's people

1 C. Jesus is the perfect purpose of the dietary laws

1. Jesus brought the dietary laws to their appointed end by fulfilling them - but this doesn't mean that the dietary laws are of no importance to us anymore because their greater purpose was always going to be found in Jesus
2. So the dietary laws find their ultimate purpose as Jesus then calls a new people out of the world and makes them a distinct, a different people - the purpose of the dietary laws was to foreshadow this greater distinction in Christ
- 1 3. So Jesus speaks to His disciples in John 15:19 - *If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.*
- 1 4. And Jesus prays in John 17:6, 14-19 - *I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word... I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.*
5. Jesus has called us to be what the dietary laws foreshadowed - He has called us out of the world, He has made us a distinct people - the dietary laws were always pointing to Christ and a new people that He would call out
6. Which leads us directly to our last point this morning:

① IV. How should this be applied to us?

① A. First, we need to be a distinct people

1. The dietary laws called Israel to be a separate people, distinct from the world and holy to God, and Jesus has called us to the same thing, so we need to live in the purpose of the dietary laws and be separate from the world
- ① 2. But, unlike Israel, our separation is not to be based on merely external things - this is emphasized throughout the New Testament, superficial things like food aren't what separate us anymore, as Paul says in Romans 14:17 - *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* - food was an excellent picture, a teacher but not the ultimate reality, our distinction must be greater
- ① 3. So Paul reminds us that we are not to be in fellowship with this world, having the same passions, pursuing the same goals, able to partner with them - II Corinthians 6:14-18 - *Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."*
- ① 4. And John tells us plainly in I John 2:15-17 - *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world---the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions---is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.*
5. Our distinction from this world must be much greater than merely a different diet - our distinction must start from the heart, everything that the world loves should be foreign to us
6. And if the dietary laws created a tangible difference between Israel and the nations, then our distinction should be even more tangible, the things that mark the world should not mark us, our passions should be so radically different that our lives are tangibly different than the world - the world should be able to look at our lives and say that we are oddly different, we are clearly not pursuing the same things that they are, we are separate to our God
7. So, my first question to you this morning is, does your life look like this? Has your pursuit of Christ so changed your passions that you no longer desire the same things that the world does - possessions, fame, entertainment, recognition, etc. - and therefore you are pursuing very different things?
8. Is your life different, or is your life full of many of the same things that any unbeliever might pursue?

① B. Second, we need to be an obedient people

1. The dietary laws called Israel to unquestioning obedience, and Jesus calls us to the same thing - earnest, unwavering obedience in everything
- ① 2. In fact, Paul will say that this is the purpose of His preaching in Romans 1:5-6 - *through whom [Jesus] we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,*
- ① 3. And Paul says that this obedience is the hallmark of the Christian life, II Corinthians 10:5 - *We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,*
- ① 4. And Paul calls us to that sort of obedience in Philippians 2:12 - *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,*
5. Understanding is excellent, and striving to understand what God has commanded is a good and right thing - but first we need to purpose to obey, to follow what God has said even when we don't understand, our lives should be marked by a radical submission to God's Word - if God says it, then I will do it
6. So this morning, our passage doesn't so much call for a specific action - you need to do this, you need to do that - but rather a sea change of heart, a desire to obey whatever God commands
7. That desire to obey in everything what God has commanded is a large part of our distinctness - if our hearts desire is to obey in everything then we will look very different than the world
8. And amazingly that desire to obey in everything is a large part of our unity as well - even when we have different understandings of the details of what God has commanded, we can sense when someone desires to obey and that earnest desire draws us together - maybe we understand differently but we're doing our best to obey together
9. So that's my second question to you this morning - is that your heart's desire? Do you desire to obey God in whatever He says? Is such obedience your joy, your passion, your pursuit?
10. May that be our pursuit by God's grace!