

LIVING WITH A HOLY GOD REQUIRES THAT HIS PEOPLE BE CLEANSED OF ALL UNCLEANNESS

Leviticus 11:1-15:33

INTRODUCTION

The five chapters of Leviticus that we are considering together this morning are for us modern readers among the most nonsensical chapters in the Bible. Chapter 11 describes which animals can be eaten and which cannot be eaten and what happens when one of the “unclean” animals dies and you touch it or it touches a utensil or food or drink in your house. Then chapter 12 explains how having a child makes a woman unfit for God’s presence and what she has to do to become fit to approach God again. Then chapters 13 and 14 describe, in mind numbing detail, how to diagnose various kinds of rashes on human skin and fungi that infect cloth, leather or houses and what to do when these rashes and fungi are present. Finally, chapter 15 talks about unmentionable things, things you just don’t talk about in public that make people unclean. Why in the world did God care about this stuff? Why should we care about it? I don’t think you could pick a portion of the Bible that appears to be less relevant to our lives than these 5 chapters. I hope to show you that these chapters, far from being irrelevant are incredibly helpful in our understanding God’s work of salvation.

There are two things we need to remember as we read these chapters. First, as I have often told you, according to the NT, every law written in the OT, including these was written for two purposes: to show you that you are a sinner and have no ability to save yourself from God's just wrath against you and to show you that Jesus Christ is a great savior for sinners who trust in him. Therefore if you read the Bible in order to find out how to be a good parent or how to live a healthy lifestyle or how to be financially successful or how to have a just government you are reading it wrong. You may end up healthy and happy and financially secure but you will go to hell because these are not the first questions the Bible is aiming to answer. Second, in light of the fact that we live in a culture obsessed with physical health and a culture where the basic principles of microbiology and hygiene are understood by most people it must be stated that the cleanliness talked about in these chapters has nothing to do with hygiene. Rather, as 11:44-45 makes plain these laws of cleanliness are about who can approach and live safely with the Holy God who has come to dwell in Israel. To be clean has nothing to do with hygiene but with being fit to be in God's presence. Those who are unclean cannot worship God in the tabernacle and in some cases cannot even live among the people of God.

There are a number of connections in these five chapters to the opening chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1-3. First, in chapter 11 in discussing the various kinds of animals that can and cannot be eaten you will notice that they are discussed in the same three categories as the creatures described in Genesis 1 and using the very same words. Creatures that live on land, in the sea and fly through the air are the three general categories in both Genesis and here. The subdivisions are also identical, fish and swarming things in the water; livestock and swarming things on the land. Second, notice in 13:45-46 that those who are unclean due to a “serious skin infection” are put outside the camp of Israel and go about mourning their condition. Remember, what makes Israel special is the fact that God has come to live in their midst, just like he lived with Adam and Eve in the Garden. In fact, he lives in a tent that has numerous symbols representing the Garden of Eden in it. How similar this is to the end of Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve are put out of the Garden of Eden into a world of misery and sorrow. Third, in Genesis 2:24-25 God describes the relationship between a husband and wife in this way, “For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked and they were not ashamed.” The fact that they were not ashamed is not merely saying they weren’t embarrassed being naked in front of each other but rather that they were living in a perfect relationship with one another and with God. Nakedness and shame are always associated with God’s displeasure and judgment in the OT except in this verse. So the relationship and physical union of the woman and man are viewed by God as a good thing. God is pleased with the naked union of husband and wife. Yet, in Leviticus 15:18 sexual union between and husband and wife is the cause of the man

and woman becoming unfit for God's presence and the entire chapter describes the various ways that the reproductive processes make people unclean, that is unfit for God.

Due to these connections that are being made with Genesis 1-3 and due to the fact that the tabernacle is in many ways a symbolic representation of the Garden of Eden these five chapters are meant for Israel and for us to see both the devastation that has come upon us because of sin and being thrown out of the Garden and a description of how God is working to bring us back to the Garden. The story of the Bible is the story of how God is restoring the world and us to our original condition. We are going back to the Garden. These chapters tell us about that restoration and reveal why it is that only God can accomplish it.

MAIN POINT

Only the Holy God can restore us and our world to its original, holy condition because...

I. Human beings live in an unclean world (11 & 13:47-49 & 14:33-57)

These regulations teach Israel and us that the world we live in, while created by God and very good at the beginning, is now a world that is contaminated and which can make us unfit for God. We live in an environment of uncleanness. This is symbolized in these cleanliness laws. Some of the animals God pronounces good in Genesis 1 are now unclean and thus cannot be eaten and if an Israelite were to come into contact with one of their corpses, he would become unclean as well. Even the meat of clean animals can only be touched and eaten if they have been ritually slaughtered. In addition there are forces at work in the world which can make clothing and tents and leather equipment and houses unfit for man or God. Property infected with various molds and mildews and fungi must be destroyed.

In the NT the word that is translated "unclean" in these chapters is most often used to describe "unclean spirits" which afflict human beings and which Jesus and his apostles drive out so that people are set free from the serious afflictions caused by them. We live in a world in which unclean spirits are let loose to bring harm to people and to deceive people. As the apostle John says in 1 John 4:1, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." He also says in 1 John 2:14-15, "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 lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life are not from the Father but from the world." In 2 Peter 1:2 we are told that through the gospel we "escape the corruption that is in the world caused by evil desires." In Galatians 1:3 Paul says that Jesus gave himself for our sins "to rescue us from this present evil age."

Just as Israelites had to be on the lookout to make sure they did not become unclean through contact with physical objects in the physical world, so we must recognize that the world we live in is an unclean world that is seeking to ensnare us and defile us and make us unfit for God. When the NT is talking about the world it is not referring to the created, physical world in which we live. There is nothing in this physical world that can make us unclean as it did the Jewish people. There is no food, no bodily function, no skin rash or mildew that can make us displeasing to God and subject us to exclusion from his presence or bring his judgment on us. When the NT uses the term world it usually is talking about the society of men in rebellion to God and ruled over by Satan and his demons. The world is that system of thought and affections and behaviors that lives indifferent to or in direct rebellion towards God. Thus, as James 4:4 says, to be friends with the world is to be an enemy of God. We recognize that this world system of human beings we live in is perverted and corrupted by sin and so we are on our guard against the many ways that this world seeks to lead us into sin and make us unclean, unfit to live with God. We recognize that there are unclean spirits let loose in the world that would deceive us and lead us away from God. We cannot simply believe everything we are told, nor uncritically embrace the way our culture uses each technological advance or the way our culture treats entertainment options or follow our culture's prescription for a good marriage or a happy family. The world that we live in is an unclean world that is heading away from God and we will only avoid being contaminated by it and swept away with it by

evaluating all that it offers and proposes to us through the word of God and in the fellowship of the church. We are ultimately powerless to remain clean in this unclean world. Only God can deliver us from it.

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II. Human beings are unclean in themselves

These chapters not only demonstrate that the external world is unclean but also that uncleanness is attached to us and to the most intimate and basic parts of our existence. Chapters 12 and 15 locate uncleanness in the most personal parts of our existence. The bearing of children is viewed as a blessing throughout the OT. Fruitful wombs are one of the evidences of God's blessing whereas barrenness is a curse. Yet, in the midst of this blessing there is uncleanness. The woman, due to the flow of blood that accompanies childbirth is unclean for seven days after the birth of a baby boy and 14 days after the birth of a baby girl. Then she must wait 33 more days if the baby was a boy or 66 if it was a girl before she can be purified and become clean again. As 12:4 says this means she cannot touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary for that entire time. She cannot participate in the worship of God. In chapter 15 the reproductive processes and organs regularly make both men and women unclean and thus unable to worship God for various portions of time. In the midst of these good gifts from God that are at the core of our humanity there is uncleanness present.

Then in chapter 13 rashes which disfigure your body for periods longer than 2 weeks make you unclean and subject to banishment from the camp. These rashes are not viewed as coming from outside of you but they cling to you, they are part of you. They just show up. You don't do anything to get a rash, it simply appears upon you. While chapter 13 does not associate the rash with particular sin, yet several times in the OT people break out in one of these skin diseases as a direct result of a specific sin. There is Miriam, Moses' sister, whom the Lord strikes with a defiling skin disease because of her rebellion against Moses. Gehazi, Elisha's assistant who gets greedy and deceptively gets payment from the Syrian general, Namaan is struck with one of the skin diseases for life. Then King Uzziah, when he seeks to enter the temple and offer incense, which only the priests can do, is struck with one of these skin diseases for the rest of this life so that he is banished from the palace and human society for life. These skin rashes are symbolic of the way in which sin comes from within us and clings to us and disfigures us.

The uncleanness associated with reproduction and with these skin diseases are a reflection of the fact that our sinfulness is pervasive. I think of the offhand way that Jesus refers to us in Matthew 7 when he is talking about prayer. He says, "Which of you fathers if your son asks for bread will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children..." Or there is Paul's long discussion of the fact of sin in Romans 1-3 where he ends with that litany of OT verses: "There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become useless. There is no one who does good, not even one." Or again, as he describes his experience as a Christian he says, "When I want to do good, evil is right there with me." From the beginning of the Bible to the end this is its testimony about us human beings: we are sinners. Jesus makes the connection between these cleanliness laws and our sinful nature and acts explicit in Mark 7 when he explains that it isn't these external things like food or bodily discharges that make people unclean. Rather the sinful thoughts, emotions and actions that come from sinful hearts is what defiles us in God's sight. We are by nature unclean, unfit for doing anything good, unfit for God and we have no ability to do anything about it, just like the woman with the flow of blood or the man with the skin rash that won't go away. Just as people with skin rashes and men and women with "bodily discharges" don't decide to get these things, so we don't decide to be sinful. We simply are sinful. We are in our very nature sinful and thus unfit for God. Our sinful condition regularly breaks out into acts of sin which make us unclean and thus unfit for God.

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- *Human beings live in an unclean world*
- *Human beings are unclean in themselves*
- *And because...*

III. Unclean humans contaminate everyone and everything

We've seen this before in Leviticus but it is really spelled out in these chapters. In 12-14, if you touch the carcasses of unclean animals or clean animals that die of natural causes you become unclean. If you come into contact with cloth or buildings that have a "skin disease" you become unclean. If you touch a person with a skin rash you become unclean. But in chapter 15, not only are you unclean if you touch a person who is unclean but you also become unclean if you touch something the unclean person touched. The uncleanness is contagious. It is like a disease that can be passed around through contact. Let me make sure you understand that the uncleanness that is being passed around in these chapters is not disease. It is ritual uncleanness. These regulations are not for the purpose of hygiene. Rather, God has declared that these particular physical things and contact with them make people unfit for his presence.

The sin which physical uncleanness represents is also contagious. It is not that we can "catch" sin simply by being in the presence of another person but rather, sin has a tendency to spread out through human society. We are social creatures and we tend to become like the people with whom we associate. We are influenced by one another for good and for ill. As Proverbs 13:20 says, "He who walks with the wise grows wise but the companion of fools suffers harm." We learn to sin by being with sinners because sin has this characteristic: it is contagious.

We all know this about ourselves. When your family member is angry and yelling at you, accusing you of being a horrible person it's very easy for you to respond with kind and gentle words and not to defend yourself with equal passion right? How many of us as young people, when our group of friends decided they were going to throw eggs at the neighbors house or perform some other act of senseless vandalism stood up to the group and sought to convince them not to do it or even walked away and did not participate? We are often shocked as we hear the reports of groups of people spontaneously joining together in vicious acts of violence against others. How is it that so many Germans participated in the murder of 6 million Jews either actively or passively? It's because sin spreads. We should not be shocked because this is who we are. Our sin is contagious and we infect one another with it through a wide range of social and relational connections.

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IV. Unclean humans deserve to be banished and killed (13:45-46, 15:31)

Every form of uncleanness results in at least a temporary banishment from the presence of God. Most of the time the banishment lasts only a day. In the case of a woman who has a baby she is banished from God's presence for either 40 or 80 days. However, in the case of the skin rashes the banishment lasts as long as the skin rash persists, which could be for life. Look at 13:45-46. The banishment is not simply from the sanctuary but the person is put outside the camp. You cannot live with your family among the people of God. The skin disease which creates blemishes on the person requires that the person live away from the people of God, outside the camp and that he or she have the physical marks of mourning upon them at all times. Torn clothes, an uncovered head with unkempt hair, a cloth covering the lower half of your face and persistent crying out are all signs of mourning, usually for someone who has died. In this case the banished people are mourning their own death. Being put out of God's presence and from among God's people is death because it is only in God's presence and among his people that you can have life. This is clearly a symbol of the banishment of humanity

from God's presence which began when God kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden and the sorrow that is ours due to that banishment. This is the precursor to Jesus' frequent descriptions of God's judgment upon the unrepentant that they are thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is what sinners who are disfigured by their sin deserve, banishment into the wilderness, apart from God and his people.

Leviticus 15:31 describes another consequence of uncleanness. If people are permitted to live in an unclean state among the Israelites, then God will kill them because by living in an unclean state in Israel they will defile God's sanctuary. God is committed to preserving the holiness of his own name and thus anyone who brings defilement into contact with his sanctuary will be killed. This is one of those foundational truths taught in the Bible that explains so much else. When unclean persons come into contact with God's holiness they must be destroyed. This is exactly what was so graphically illustrated in the previous chapter when Aaron's two oldest boys presented strange, that is unholy, fire to God. God's holiness blazed forth in just wrath and burned them up. This is what always happens when unclean people come into contact with God's holy presence.

Throughout the NT these two metaphors are used in describing God's punishment against those who do not trust in Jesus Christ. God will banish them from his presence and into the outer darkness and God will destroy them in the fire of his wrath. In fact the final chapters of the Bible use both of these metaphors in very graphic ways as it describes God's throwing his enemies into the lake of fire which is described as the second death. Then in Revelation 22:15, after describing the new Jerusalem where God's people will live John says, "Outside (the new Jerusalem) are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood." Banishment and death await those who are unclean in God's sight.

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V. God cleanses and makes holy his unclean people through priest, sacrifice and washing

These five chapters are full of good news. While there are many ways for a person to become unclean, yet God has made a way for the unclean to be made clean. When you eat or touch unclean meat by washing your clothes and waiting one day you can enter again into God's sanctuary. The woman made unclean by her flow of blood following the birth of her children waits either 40 or 80 days and then can go to the tabernacle with a year old lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or dove for a sin offering. When the priest offers these two animals in the prescribed way he makes atonement for her and she is clean and thus able to draw near to God again. The person who is unclean due to a rash on his skin has to go through a more complicated week-long ritual. The purification process begins with a priest pronouncing him clean. It then entails the killing of a bird, the sprinkling of that bird's blood on the person using another live bird, the release of that live bird, washing clothes and body twice, shaving all the hair off the body twice and then on the 8th day the four main types of offerings are made by the priest on behalf of the cleansed person: the guilt offering, the sin offering, the burnt offering and the grain offering.

As I read these chapters I began to think about the record of Jesus' life contained in the gospels. What began to dawn on me is that lots of the language describing Jesus' healing ministry revolves around the conditions described in these chapters. Dozens of times he casts out unclean spirits. He cleanses those with skin diseases who are banished from the community. When John the Baptist sends a delegation to ask if he is the Messiah one of the evidences he gives is the healing of those with skin diseases. When he commissions his disciples to carry on his ministry he commands them to "cleanse lepers and cast out unclean spirits." One of the most striking and moving stories is when a woman who has had a "flow of blood" (the exact same Greek phrase as in Leviticus 12:7 and 15:25) for 12 years touches Jesus' robe because she believes she will be healed from her flow by

that simple touch. This woman has been unable to draw near to God for 12 years nor has she been able to have any physical touch from any other human being as she would make whoever touched her unclean. Yet, by simply touching Jesus' robe she is healed. Finally, in John 13, just before he eats the Last Supper with his disciples he washes their feet. When Peter refuses to let him wash his feet Jesus says, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me. Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." Jesus symbolizes the washing of believers by his blood and by his Spirit in the physical act of washing their feet. The gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry highlight Jesus' cleansing people of the contaminations listed in Leviticus and of explaining what they symbolized, acts of sin coming from a heart of sin. In all of these acts he is fulfilling what these laws meant. He is the one who restores God's defiled people and creation to its original condition of cleanliness and holiness. The amazing thing is that Jesus doesn't just pronounce people clean like the priests, he actually heals them and cleanses them.

When we turn to the rest of the NT this language of cleansing by blood and by water and as our high priest is repeatedly used in describing Jesus and what he has done for us. In Ephesians 5:24 Jesus made the church holy "by cleansing her with the washing with water through the word." In Titus 2:14 Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to cleanse for himself a people of his very own, eager to do what is good." Then a few verses later Paul writes, "He (God the Father) saved us through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior." Five or six times the cleansing of heaven and of us by Christ our high priest with his blood is referred to in the letter to the Hebrews. And so we are commanded in Hebrews 10:22, "let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water." Here is the language of Leviticus 11-15 applied to us by the work of Christ so that we are not banished from God's presence or killed because we are unclean. We have been cleansed of our defilement caused by our sin (not eating the wrong food or having a skin rash) and thus we can openly draw near to God now and forever.

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