

Clean & Unclean

Good morning! Please turn to Leviticus 11. We'll be looking at chapters 11-15 this morning. These are *interesting* chapters for sure. That's one word for them. Another word might be, "gross." There are laws and regulations here that feel weird or really odd to modern readers. And so this sermon may make us squirm a little bit. I'm not going to be intentionally gross, but there are some verses here that have to do with bodily fluids and mold/mildew, and diseases, and touching dead animals.

But I believe that if we can understand what's going on here, there will be some helpful truths for us on the other side. So I'm asking for you to focus in, and we'll see what the Lord has for us this morning from these chapters, ok?

By way of review, Leviticus is answer the question:

Who can dwell in God's house? Those who are holy and clean

The closer to the presence of God, the more strict the standards are for holiness and purity. The presence of God in the center of the camp and the center of the tabernacle – that's the realm of life and rest and peace. Outside the camp is the realm of death and disorder.

You could picture it this way:

Life & Order (sin)→ Death & Disorder

Not all disorder comes from particular sins. If a person gets cancer, it's not necessarily the direct result of personal sin. But the existence of cancer in the world is because of sin. The world is fallen. It's broken. And so there is death and disease and disorder in the world because they are the effects of sin. And one of the effects of sin is uncleanness.

And that's important for us to distinguish in our minds because we'll be talking about clean and unclean things this morning, and those aren't the same thing as talking about things that are sinful or not. They're related – unclean things and disorder and death happen because the world is under the curse of God because of sin. Hopefully, that will become more clear as we look at these chapters this morning.

One of the jobs of the priests was to help the people know what was clean and what wasn't. Look at **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."

So there are these categories – the holy and the common. And the unclean and the clean. The priests job was to distinguish between these categories for the people and to teach them the laws of Moses.

Some of you have toddlers or little kids in your life, and part of your job as a parent or grandparent or caregiver is to distinguish between what's clean and unclean for your kids. Don't drink that milk, it's been left out and gone bad. Don't climb on that bench, it's got bird poop all over it. Yes, you can eat that candy that fell on the floor **if** you pick it up before it's been five-seconds. We're always making these kind of judgment calls, distinguishing between the clean and unclean.

In chapters 11 through 15, God is going to reveal His laws for distinguishing the holy and the common and between the clean and unclean.

Chapter 11 – rules about clean vs unclean animals for food and about touching clean and unclean animal carcasses

Chapter 12 – laws regarding the purification required after childbirth

Chapters 13-14 – regulations about skin diseases and mold on clothes, houses, and other buildings

Chapter 15 – regulations about bodily discharges from men and women

The categories are basically – what goes in to the body (ch 11), what goes out of the body (ch 12), what goes on the body (cha 13/14), and what goes out of the body (ch 15) So I'm not going to read all of these chapters, but I do want to read a few excerpts so that we get a sense of what God is saying in this portion of Leviticus...

Read **Leviticus 11:1-8, 24-25, 41-47.**

Intro

I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that every culture has its own rules and regulations about food and even some unwritten rules about 'gross' things. Our culture says, don't eat cats or horses, but you can eat cows and pigs and chickens. Or how about this one – don't pick your nose. It's not sinful necessarily, but it's gross. But you can pick your ear or at least that doesn't seem as bad as picking your nose in our culture.

And so we live in a particular culture, and when confronted with another culture's rules, written or assumed, it can be jarring for us. Many other places have unusual habits and customs. Several places I've been serve rice and beans at breakfast or for every meal. Whereas, we have certain foods that we just treat as breakfast foods. There are some foods that just belong to that category in our minds.

And so, it takes some work for us to try to see and understand what's going on with how these other people think about the world. But if we do the work, we'll be better able to understand the world of the Bible. Some of the stories in the gospels, for example, about Jesus healing lepers or a woman with a bleeding issue – they're hit us differently if we understand what's being said in these chapters.

Likewise, if we work to understand Leviticus, we'll be better able to appreciate and understand what God wants from us as His New Covenant people. How should we think about God's commands for us in our lives? What does God want? And I pray that we'll have a renewed longing for the future kingdom of God where all things are made right and whole.

So to get there, my outline is pretty straightforward. We'll talk first about what these laws are saying, secondly, why these laws were given, and then finally what these laws have to do with us today.

What do these laws say?

As I mentioned a moment ago, these laws are essentially about distinguishing between the holy and the common, and the clean and unclean.

Here's one way to picture this relationship (show diagram):

| (in presence) | (in camp) | (outside camp) |
|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| Holy | Common | |
| | Clean | Unclean |

So all the clean things aren't necessarily holy. But all holy things had to be clean. If we think about it like having fine china that's used for special occasions. That china could be thought of as holy – it's dedicated for use on special occasions and set apart for that purpose. And a china plate could be clean or unclean.

It's important to note that you must not have anything unclean come into contact with anything holy. You wouldn't put a dirty china plate in front of a guest on a special occasion. And that's because the holy things are connected with the presence of God in the midst of His people. Unclean things must not touch the holy things or the unclean things will be consumed.

So holy and common have to do with the status of a thing – has it been devoted for a special purpose? And clean or unclean have to do with the condition of that thing – is it affected by the realm of death or the curse of sin?

That's easier to see with some of these laws than others. For example, it probably makes sense to us that mold or mildew on houses and buildings needed to be removed or else the house would be considered unclean. If a house had mold growing on the walls, then it could cause death or disease. It's tainted by the effects of sin.

It's not sin to have mold in your house, but it does make the house unclean. And the reason that there are molds and things that cause diseases or even death is because of sin in the world. So the house needed to be cleansed or purified to remain in the camp. That seems pretty straightforward.

Other laws here are a bit more obscure. Things like skin diseases or the bodily discharges from a woman's menstrual cycle or the purification needed after a woman gave birth. What's up with those things?

Again, it's not sin to be unclean or affected by the curse of sin. But these things like skin diseases and stuff that comes out of the body, including and especially blood, have to do

with life leaving the body. The life of creatures lies in the blood, chapter 17 will say, and so these things belong to or are related to the realm of death in that sense.

Or consider a person with leprosy – which described a variety of skin diseases or rashes where the skin was discolored and flaked off.

Leviticus 13:45-46

“The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ **46** He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.

So a person with leprosy or a skin condition like that would need to live outside the camp and call out ‘Unclean!’ to those who passed by. There’s probably some health reasons for this – keeping certain diseases or conditions from spreading by quarantining the sick. But the primary reason likely has more to do with the symbolism of dead skin flaking off of a person, rendering them unclean because of the association with death. A person with leprosy wasn’t more sinful than the rest of the people, but they were experiencing the effects of sin and death on their body.

We could say similar things about the clean and unclean animals. The people were not to touch dead carcasses, unless it was a clean animal being sacrificed. Don’t have contact with things that belong to the realm of death.

Likewise, some of the unclean animals were likely considered unclean because they were associated with death. Many of the unclean birds, for instance, were scavengers like vultures who ate dead carcasses. They were unclean to eat.

But there are other laws that don’t seem to easily follow this logic. Look at chapter 12 with me. If a woman gave birth to a son or a daughter, she had to go through a time of quarantine before she could again enter the public life and go to feasts and worship, etc. That seems simple enough – there is blood involved in childbirth, it can be a messy thing especially in the ancient world, and so a time of purification makes some sense. It might have even been appreciated by a mother to be free from social expectations after having given birth.

But then there's the tricky part – the time of purification required is different if the child is a boy or a girl. If a woman gave birth to a girl, the time required was twice as long than if she had a boy. What's that about? Is this patriarchal oppression? Prejudice against girls? I don't think so.

Various reasons have been suggested, including that girls may have required additional purification because they themselves will eventually have a menstrual cycle. That could be, but I think a better reason has to do with something that the male children will undergo which the girls will not, namely circumcision. Male infants were to be circumcised on the eighth day, and so there was a mechanism for ritual purity in place for the boys that didn't take place for the girls. That may have more to do with the difference in timing.

Then there are the food laws about clean and unclean animals. Various explanations have been given for why some animals were considered clean and others were unclean. At the end of the day, we're not told exactly why. Evidently, these laws made sense for the people of Israel at that time, even though it isn't as readily transparent to us today.

Some people have suggested that the reason for the laws is for health and safety. Unclean animals were more likely to cause disease when eaten, especially if not cooked properly. The problem with this suggestion is that there are also problems with the clean animals being improperly cooked causing diseases. In addition, later the New Testament declares these animals to be clean, and there isn't any evidence that the danger in eating these animals was any different at that point.

Other have suggested that the unclean animals were associated with worshiping idols or false gods of the surrounding nations. Again, that may have been part of the reason, but it doesn't account for all of the animals, and it doesn't explain why some of the animals were clean but were also used in pagan worship – like bulls and goats.

A final suggestion that I'll mention is a bit harder to follow. About fifty years ago, one scholar suggested that the animals which were considered clean were those that were more rightly ordered. They looked and behaved in ways that made sense to the people of that day. They seemed to move about in ways that matched their environments.

So if you think about something like this...(show picture)

Do you know what this is? It's a platypus – it looks disordered. It doesn't seem to be one thing. It looks like a combination of things. Like a beaver with a long tongue and a duck that also lays eggs.



On the other hand, animals that had split hooves and chewed the cud, they seemed to be rightly ordered. They made sense. Animals that don't have a split hoof or don't chew the cud – they don't make sense, they're unclean. Camels, for example, they chew the cud but they don't have split hooves. They have padded toes instead. And fish that had scales – they make sense. Eels and snakes – they don't make sense; they're disordered and unclean. Insects are detestable – they have wings and legs and swarm about. They're unclean with one exception – the insects that hop about (grasshoppers); they're rightly ordered and you can eat those.

The reason for these laws is still a bit unclear to modern readers, though I think we can make some observations, which I'll outline in a minute. There's probably a combination of reasons that some animals were considered unclean. They had an association with death like the vultures; they may have been more likely to carry disease like mice; or they may have seemed to be disordered.

Why were these laws given?

So if we aren't told exactly why these laws concerning clean and unclean things were given, what can we say? How did these laws function for the average Israelite?

Let me give you three reasons:

1. To share in God's holiness

The laws about cleanliness showed the people that they needed to share in the holiness of God. That's the connection that God makes for us in chapter 11...

Leviticus 11:44-45

44 For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. **45** For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."

The people are to be holy because God is holy. They are to share in His holiness.

It has been observed, and I think it's right, that the people of God were to eat the same things that God 'eats' in the sacrifices. That is, they were to offer bulls and goats and birds that were clean in their sacrifices to God. And they were to eat the same animals themselves.

That's significant, especially when you remember that most people were not eating meat at most of their meals. Eating meat would have been a luxury for most people. So when they came to eat a meal, they needed to do so with clean animals, just like when they made an offering to the Lord. They are to share in the holiness of the Lord.

2. To be distinct from the death and idolatry

A second reason is related to the first. The cleanliness laws taught the people that they were to share in the holiness of God and also that they were to be distinct from the realm of death and the false gods of the surrounding nations.

I mentioned a moment ago that this is likely not the full explanation for why an animal would have been considered clean or unclean – but it does explain in part why some of the animals were forbidden. Those animals that are scavengers like vultures and ate mostly dead things – they were unclean. Other animals were connected with pagan worship and were also unclean.

God desired for his people to be distinct from the surrounding nations, and one of the primary ways to set apart His people was to have them only eat certain animals. If you've ever been to another country, or even another part of this country, one of the first things you may notice is that there is a difference in the food that people eat.

Growing up, I had this assumption that a common form of pizza was what they served at Arni's or Pizza King – that kind of flat, thin crust with finely chopped up toppings. I thought that was normal. I then lived in eastern Pennsylvania and had Old Forge pizza, which is a deep dish and has American cheese on it. I got to tell you – it's weird. Come to find out, our corner of Indiana is distinct from other parts of the country, in part because of our food, our pizza.

In a similar way, the kind of food that God's people were to eat would keep them distinct from the other nations. Remember, they were to be priests for the world, a city set on a hill to show the rest of the world God's goodness and His character.

3. To remind about the need for cleansing and renewal in God's kingdom

A third reason that the laws regarding cleanliness and purity were given was to be a regular reminder about the need for cleansing and renewal in God's kingdom.

To have God dwell in the midst of a sinful and unclean people meant that the people needed to be vigilant about making sure that their food and their clothing and their bodies were clean. They couldn't be around mold. They couldn't have skin flaking off of their bodies. They were regularly partaking in bathing and purification for marital relations and menstrual cycles and normal, everyday things. Again, not things that were sinful or shameful in themselves. But these things reminded them that the world was not as it is supposed to be. There is disorder and death and messiness that needs to be addressed.

It was always before them – God is holy and we are sinful. For us to dwell with Him, we need to be holy and clean.

Jay Sklar wrote one of the commentaries that I've been using for my study in this series. And he teaches a semester long class on Leviticus. And in the final weeks, one of the assignments that he gives his students is for them to try to keep all the laws of Leviticus for a whole week. How would you like to do that?

Well, one of the common responses that he gets from his students are comments about how consuming it is to think about cleanliness and purity and holiness all the time. You're constantly confronted with becoming unclean, or being defiled by one thing or another, or eating unclean food or violating this or that law. And that's part of the point – God wants His people to see and recognize their constant need to be cleansed and made whole and clean.

What do they mean for us today?

So what, then, do these chapters mean for us today? What do these laws about clean and unclean animals, and purification rituals, and bodily discharges, and moldy houses have to do with us?

I mentioned earlier that knowing Leviticus helps us understand more deeply what's going on in the gospels, when Jesus heals lepers and cleanses people who are unclean. Jesus heals the lepers by touching them. And in doing so, He doesn't become unclean, instead He makes the leper clean! He cleanses the woman with the bleeding issue.

One of the problems with the Old Testament Law was that it couldn't save anyone. The priests couldn't make people clean – they could only declare what was clean and what wasn't. They couldn't cure leprosy, they could only recognize when a person had been cleansed. They were more like health inspectors than doctors.

But Jesus is better! He does not merely inspect us for cleanliness – he purifies and redeems by the washing of regeneration in our hearts. Jesus changes everything. When we trust in Him, Jesus makes us clean from the inside out. And that fundamentally changes how we apply these laws about cleanliness to our lives today. We're not under them in the same way that OT Israel was. So what do these laws mean for us today? What do they teach us?

Well, there are many ways that the NT writers unpack these things for believers today, but I want to mention three that have to do with the three purposes for these laws that I just spoke about.

Jesus cares about holiness in our hearts

To say it another way, New Covenant believers are called to share in the holiness of God in our hearts. Under the cleanliness laws of Leviticus, the people were to share in the holiness of God by eating the same foods that God did. In the New Testament, God makes clear what is implied in the Law. And that is, God is not merely concerned with external conformity to the Law – he's concerned with the hearts of His people.

That's one of the reasons Jesus opposed the Pharisees. The Pharisees were all wrapped up in the differences between clean and unclean; they had added all of these additional requirements to make sure that they were totally clean – but they were missing the point of being holy in their hearts.

Look at **Matthew 23:23-24**,
Jesus says,

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. **24** You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

The religious leaders were tithing on their spices which they would have done on these scales, but the whole time, they’re neglecting the heavier and more important issues of justice and mercy and faithfulness. It’s like they’re straining their food, lest they eat an unclean gnat but they’re eating the unclean camel whole!

Or listen to **Mark 7:18-23**, Jesus says,

18 ... Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, **19** since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) **20** And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. **21** For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, **22** coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. **23** All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Jesus is saying, don’t miss the point of the clean and unclean laws. They are not what defile people. What defiles people has to do with what’s going on in their hearts – it’s about holiness on the inside of a person.

So what does that mean for us?

It means that being clean and pure has much more to do with what is happening in our hearts and minds than what kind of food we eat or needing to bathe if we touch a dead animal. Jesus cares about what we think about and what we meditate on.

What are the thoughts that fill your mind? When you don’t have other things to think about, where does your mind go? What do you think about when you’re alone? When you lie down to sleep?

Jesus said that our hearts, our minds – that’s where evil thoughts live. The sexual immorality, the pride, the anger and slander, the lies and deceit, the coveting and envy. Are you concerned with holiness on the inside? Are you working at killing sin in your heart, by the grace of God?

But thanks be to God, Jesus gives us new hearts and makes us holy from the inside out. If we look at our chart again...

| | |
|----------|------------------------|
| Holiness | Common |
| | Clean Unclean |

Jesus came, not just to make His followers clean on the outside but holy on the inside. He isn't after just cleaning you on the outside, he washes us with regeneration in our hearts. Your battle with sin in your mind has been won by Christ. You are no longer enslaved to the earthly passions of your flesh. Jesus makes us holy in our hearts.

Jesus has made all things clean

We are no longer under the food laws of Leviticus. The NT is crystal clear about this in several passages – these food laws have been fulfilled by the coming of Christ and are no longer in place for Christians today. So Paul will say, for example, in **1 Timothy 4:4-5** For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, **5** for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

You don't have to worry about whether the food you eat is clean or not by the standards of Leviticus 11. You should probably not eat unclean food, as in, like, wash your fruits and vegetables and don't eat stuff that's been in the dirt. But you don't have to worry about eating bacon or other animals that are unclean. Jesus has made all food clean.

What's more, the food laws pointed to greater realities beyond themselves. Israel was to be distinct from all the other nations, keeping the food laws in order to be clean and holy. But now, Jesus invites the nations to be holy through faith in Him. People don't have to become Jewish first before trusting in Jesus. That was the big controversy that we saw when we went through the book of Acts.

In Acts 10, the apostle Peter has a vision from God and is told to eat all kinds of animals – clean and unclean. And the point isn't just that all food is clean; the point is that all people are clean. Peter tells Cornelius in **Acts 10:28**

And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean."

The point wasn't animals – the point was people. No person is unclean or common. That means the people of God no longer need to externally separate from unclean animals or from any people group like the Gentiles. All people are now invited into fellowship with God through Christ. Jesus calls the nations to come and follow Him and He will make them holy.

I wonder if there are any people or groups of people that you struggle to consider clean. Prejudice against certain ethnic groups or peoples has no place in the heart of believers, but it's something that we need to be vigilant about opposing. We have to remember, the church isn't tied to any one ethnic group or identity. It's way bigger than that. God says don't call anyone common or unclean. All are invited to follow Jesus!

However, we also need to say that because all people are clean is not to say that all have been made holy and right before God. That comes through faith in Christ alone. You don't have to be clean according to the Old Testament Law, but you do need the holiness that comes only through faith in Jesus.

Jesus lived a perfect and sinless life. He was completely holy and completely clean. He kept all the laws in perfect obedience. And when we trust in Him, He gives us His righteousness and takes our sin on Himself. It's the great exchange of the gospel.

He bore the reproach of taking all of our sin and filth on Himself. Isaiah 53 says that He was smitten by God and afflicted. That word afflicted is most often used to describe a person being afflicted with leprosy. To say that Jesus was afflicted is to say that He took our sin and suffering and the uncleanness of our disease and even death in our place. He suffered on the Cross, outside the city where all the unclean things had to go, so that we might be saved. He went outside, so that we could be brought inside.

Hebrews 13:12

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.

He went outside the gate to sanctify us by His blood. To sanctify is to make holy. In Jesus, we are changed from the inside out. What a great reminder to us today. Just consider that – Jesus has made you holy and clean. He sanctified you and made you holy.

No matter what the world says about you or what your conscience says about you – if you're in Christ, you are holy and clean.

Jesus will make all things clean and holy one day

Finally, we see in these cleanliness laws a reminder that the earth is groaning for redemption. The clean laws preached a message day after day – the world is fallen and the realm of death encroaches on everything. The ongoing effects of sin daily remind us about the need for God's renewal and the resurrection in the kingdom where all things are made new. Revelation 21 speaks about this kingdom.

Revelation 21:22-27

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. **23** And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. **24** By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, **25** and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. **26** They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. **27** But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

There will be nothing unclean. No death or disease. Every tear will be wiped away. All will be made new and as it should be. Today, creation groans and the effects of sin continue to cause shame and defilement. Life hurts. There is pain. Things get messy and unclean so quickly.

But let's remember and even allow the fallenness of this world to remind us of our hope for cleansing and renewal. We have a sure hope for a new heavens and a new earth where Jesus will make all things clean and holy.

Jesus makes us holy. He makes us clean. And one day – all will be holy and right.

Let's pray...