



Clean and Unclean

Kicking It Off

What is one place you would never show up to without changing clothes first, and what do you think would happen if you did?

Read

Leviticus 13:45-46;
Mark 1:40-45

Summary

Leviticus 11 through 15 is the part of the book people skip. Food rules, childbirth, skin diseases, bodily discharges. It reads like God is handing out a list of things that make a person disgusting, and it is easy to walk away thinking He finds ordinary human bodies offensive. That is not what is happening, and the whole week turns on getting this right.

Unclean does not mean sinful. Burying your father makes you unclean, and burying your father is an act of love. Having a baby makes you unclean, and having a baby is not a sin. Think about coming out of a mud bath at a hot spring. Nobody says you are wicked for being covered in mud. They would still stop you at the door of a wedding and ask you to go home and change. That is the difference between being bad and being unfit for where you are trying to go. God has moved into the middle of the camp, and everything in these chapters is about what it takes to walk toward Him.

Read them closely and you notice something else. Uncleanliness spreads. Touch the bed, sit on the chair, brush past someone on the road, and it is on you, often without your knowing. You can keep yourself scrubbed and laundered and still be undone by your neighbor. Which is the real point of these chapters: nobody stays clean. Not one person in that camp could manage it.

Then Jesus walks up to a man with leprosy, a man who had spent years shouting "Unclean" so people would back away, and reaches out and touches him. Under the old rules that contact runs one direction, and the clean person goes home dirty. Here it runs backward. The man comes away clean. That is the gospel in these chapters. You do not get clean enough to come to God. You come, and He makes you clean. And then He

sends you back out to the people everyone else avoids, because that is where He already is.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. Unclean and sinful are two different categories, and the sermon said that confusing them is where Leviticus goes wrong for most people. Where have you treated something in your own life as a sin when it was really just a hard or messy part of being human?
3. Uncleanliness spread by contact, so a person could be careful all week and still be undone by a neighbor he never noticed (15:5-7). What is something that has landed on your life through no choice of your own, and how has it shaped the way you come to God?
4. The man with leprosy had to live outside the camp and call out "Unclean" so that people would step back (13:45-46). Is there a corner of your life you have kept outside the camp because you assumed it was too far gone to bring near God?
5. Jesus stretched out His hand and touched the man, and instead of becoming unclean He made him clean (Mark 1:41-42). What would change this week if you believed you did not have to clean yourself up before coming to Him?
6. The sermon said that God is found outside the camp, with the people the rest of us quietly avoid. Who is one person you have been keeping at arm's length, and what is one ordinary thing you could do to move toward them?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"When I was a kid my parents would take us to hot springs in Colorado, and there was this giant mud pile in the middle, and we would throw mud at each other until we looked like the swamp thing. There is nothing wrong with that, and I would not say it is sinful. But if I tried to go to a wedding covered in mud, still in my swimsuit, the people celebrating would look at me and say, can you go home and change, can you shower and put on the right attire. That is what a lot of people in Leviticus are. Covered in something that is not sinful, and still covered in a way that does not belong where they are going."

"One thing you may not have heard from someone who is Jewish, or even heard in a sermon: the point of Leviticus is to prove that no one stays clean. No one is clean. So the Pharisee says, I made sure I was clean head to toe, I anointed myself with oil, my garments are not of mixed fabric. And Leviticus 15 asks, what about your neighbor? You went through his house. You walked that road and you may have brushed someone. Guess what, they were unclean, and now you touched them. So you are unclean too."

"The leper is told, do not tell anyone. And he says, all right, I will not tell anyone. And then what does he do? I have to tell everybody. You guys know me. I was the guy with leprosy. There is this man, Jesus, and He touched me. He touched me. No one has touched me. No one is allowed to touch me. For years no one could touch me. But He touched me and now I am healed. Look, look, look. I am healed."

"Too many times the church has been a place we built for the clean to enter into the presence of God. So you need to be a Christian, you need to do this and this and this, you need to look a certain way and be a certain way and smell a certain way, you need to know the words we use and the phrases we have, because we all have to be this one homogeneous culture in order to be accepted by God. I am so done with it, because that is not what is going to save you. What is going to save you? The touch of Jesus."

Sermon Notes**Leviticus 13:45-46**

45 *"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.*

Mark 1:40-45

40 *And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean."* 41 *Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean."* 42 *And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.* 43 *And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once,* 44 *and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them."* 45 *But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.*

Outline

1. The Closer You Get - Leviticus 11-15, with 15:31

- a. The tabernacle sits in the center of the camp, so the whole book is about how a people approach the God living in the middle of them, down to their food and their bodies.
- b. Unclean is not sinful. Childbirth is not a sin, burying your father is love, and both make a person unclean.
- c. Covered in mud at the hot springs nobody calls you wicked, and you still cannot walk into a wedding that way. Somebody would ask you to go home, shower, and change.
- d. God is emphasizing His holiness to a wandering people, so approaching Him is not a trivial matter and He is not our homeboy.
- e. An Israelite did not hear these laws as guard rails. He heard them as an embrace, because they told him how to live near a holy God and how to get back when he could not.

2. Nobody Stays Clean - Leviticus 12; 13-14; 15

- a. The point of Leviticus is to prove that no one stays clean. Uncleaness spreads by contact, so anyone who touches the bed, the seat, or the body of the one with a discharge is unclean until evening (15:5-7).
- b. It happens by accident. You enter a house, you are handed a rag, you brush someone on the road, and you never knew.
- c. The Pharisee could answer for his own bath and his own clothes and could not answer for his neighbor, which is how the system runs out.
- d. The one with the skin disease tears his clothes, covers his lip, cries "Unclean, unclean," and lives alone outside the camp (13:45-46).
- e. The road back is real. Two birds, one killed over fresh water and one released alive, blood sprinkled seven times on the one being restored, and the priest pronounces him clean (14:4-7).

3. He Touched the Unclean - Mark 1:40-45; Mark 7:20-23; 1 Peter 1:15-16; Hebrews 13:12-13; Acts 10:13-15, 28

- a. The leper kneels and says, "If you will, you can make me clean," and Jesus stretches out His hand and touches him (Mark 1:40-42). Under Leviticus the contact runs one way, and here it runs backward.
- b. That is Jesus not abolishing the law but fulfilling it. He never said the leprosy was fine. He changed the man's state.
- c. The healed cannot keep quiet. The man talks so freely that Jesus can no longer enter a town openly and stays out in desolate places (Mark 1:45).

- d. In Mark 7 Jesus declares all food clean and names what actually defiles, the evil that comes from within, out of the heart (7:20-23). Peter still quotes Leviticus to the church, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16).
- e. Jesus suffered outside the gate, so we go to Him outside the camp and bear the reproach He endured (Hebrews 13:12-13), and God had to teach Peter not to call any person common or unclean (Acts 10:28).

Notes

If you ask my wife, she will tell you I am always running. I ran a half marathon in West Seattle yesterday and hit my pace, six seconds off. What I love about running is not the running. I dislike the running. I love the shower afterward, when you get in soaked and salted and come out feeling washed. I start with sweat because these chapters are not something we get to wave off. Just by living your life you end up in a state of uncleanness.

This is where Leviticus gets misread more than anywhere else, because people turn uncleanness into a moral issue, as though unclean meant you were in sin. It does not. These rules have to do with the ordinary business of being alive, and with what makes a person inappropriate to come near God. Remember where God is. The tent of meeting sits in the center of the camp, so the whole book is about how a people approach the God who has moved in among them. The first chapters gave us the sacrifices. Now we get ritual purity, and the plain fact that you cannot just show up. Here is the proof it is not moralistic. Every person in that camp became unclean at one time or another. If someone in your family dies and you bury them, touching the body makes you ceremonially unclean. Is it wrong to bury your father? Not at all. It is love, and it still makes you unclean. The same goes for bodily discharges, and this is where I feel for the women in Israel, because whether it was childbirth or the ordinary rhythm of the month, a discharge put a woman outside for a time. The same rules fall on men in chapter 15. But giving birth does not make you sinful. It has nothing to do with sin. It says that at that moment her physical state, not her character, keeps her from standing in the holiness of God.

When I was a kid my parents took us to hot springs in Colorado, where there was a mud pile in the middle and the mud was supposed to be good for your skin. We threw it at each other until we looked like the swamp thing. Nothing wrong with that, and I would not call it sinful. But if I walked into a wedding covered in mud, in my swimsuit, the people celebrating would say, who are you, can you go home and shower and put on the right attire. That is what many people in Leviticus are. Covered in something that is not sinful and is still not fit for where they are trying to go.

During the Exodus, with the people still wandering, God is pressing His holiness on them. He is not our homeboy, the friend we stroll up to however we like because He will handle it. He goes past the sacrifices to the state of their bodies. The word used is leprosy, though it covers rashes and redness and boils, and the instruction is that a man with an infectious rash goes outside the community until a priest can pronounce him clean. They were a nomadic people in tents who knew nothing about bacteria and were not trying to. The center of that camp had to be pure, and the reason was not sanitation.

The reason was that He was there, and He is holy. So an Israelite does not complain that Leviticus is long. He says, praise be to God that His camp is pure, and praise be to God that when I fall into uncleanness He has told me how to come back. They did not hear guard rails. They heard an embrace.

So settle this first: unclean is not the same as sinful. Childbirth is not a sin. Burying your father is love. Both make a person unclean. People keep making uncleanness a sin issue when Leviticus is making it a state issue. And when someone says it is all sin anyway, remember that sinfulness is not only moral brokenness. Sin is the breaking of God's shalom, His peace, His wholeness, His tov, and all of reality carries that break. You can be unclean without being condemned. You are simply, for now, not fit to come near, and then God gives the road back. It is never permanent. What changed for us is the ritual. We become clean only by the blood of Jesus, only through our High Priest, not by what we eat or wear, not by whether our bodies are behaving.

Listen to how it spreads. Anyone who touches his bed washes his clothes, bathes, and is unclean until evening, and so is anyone who sits where he sat (15:5-7). None of that requires you to do anything wrong. Here is what you may not have heard from a Jewish friend or from a pulpit: the point of Leviticus is to prove that no one stays clean. No one is clean. Walk into church, look around, and think, these are good people. Get to know them. And the holiness of God is not only a question about your morals. It demands that you be physically pure too, and now it gets damning. Did you shower before church? Were those clothes properly laundered? The Pharisees could answer that. Clean head to toe, anointed with oil, no mixed fabric. Then chapter 15 asks the question they cannot answer. What about your neighbor, the house you passed through, the man you brushed on the road? Their humility was built in. I will not always be clean, and neither will my wife, my children, or my neighbors.

Then the hardest one. The man with the disease wears torn clothes, covers his upper lip, cries "Unclean, unclean," and lives alone outside the camp (13:45-46). In a world that old, plain acne would have sent you past the edge. Out you went, calling "Unclean" so people could step back, because your uncleanness would become theirs and they wanted to come near God. And God gives a way home. Two live birds, one killed over fresh water and one released into the open field, blood sprinkled seven times on the man being restored, and the priest pronounces him clean (14:4-7). That is grace in a strange ceremony. Chapter 13 has a chapter 14.

So where does the confusion come from? It comes from Christ, and not because He made it confusing. He flips the script. A leper kneels and says, "If you will, you can make me clean," and Jesus stretches out His hand and touches him, and immediately the leprosy leaves him (Mark 1:40-42). To a Jew that is blasphemy. The law says do not

touch him. This is the key to His fulfilling the law instead of abolishing it. He never told the lepers their leprosy was fine, just part of who they were now. He touched the man, the leprosy was gone, and his state changed from unclean to clean. Not because the man earned it. He met Jesus, Jesus touched him, and he was healed. I spent the first half of this sermon saying a holy God cannot coexist with brokenness. If you think you have your theology figured out, God will break it. And I am still right, because the power of Christ defeated the brokenness and healed the man.

He does it constantly, and the people He touches cannot keep quiet. He told the leper not to tell anyone, and the man told everybody. You know me. I was the man with leprosy. For years nobody could touch me, nobody was allowed. He touched me, and now I am healed. He talked so freely that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town and was out in desolate places, with people coming to Him from every quarter.

Then comes the food. I have heard all the explanations for why the pig. I am not going to explain the logic of God to you. I am telling you the rules of God. In Mark 7 Jesus declares all food clean and says what comes out of a person is what defiles him, the evil that comes from within, out of the heart. What you eat is not what defiles you. Your heart is. That list runs in the negative, and underneath it you are called to love one another. It does not mean the food laws never mattered to Israel. They were a specific law for a specific people at a specific point in God's plan, and they showed how incapable we are of keeping His holiness of either kind. The theology has not moved. Peter writes the same thing to the church: "As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, you shall be holy, for I am holy."

What changed is the ritual. Theirs was to separate, inside the city and outside the city. Ours follows Jesus, and Jesus is outside the camp. He suffered outside the gate to sanctify the people through His own blood, so let us go to Him outside the camp and bear the reproach He endured (Hebrews 13:12-13). He was out there with the lepers, the tax collectors, the blind, the sick, and the poor. He died at Golgotha, not in the city. You will find Him where people are hurting. Our religious instinct hates that. Peter had to be told twice. "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." "By no means, Lord." "What God has made clean, do not call common." He was not saved into ritual purity. He was saved by the touch of Jesus.

So this series keeps holding up the holiness of God. You cannot approach Him unclean. But we have a Jesus who has touched us, and that is why we can come in, and why the Spirit can live in us and teach us. Once you have been touched you cannot shut up about it, because I was lost and now I am found. You are a royal priesthood called to proclaim the excellencies of the One who saved you, and the Spirit will call you outside the city into dark places. There is darkness in the church too. And here is the main issue. I

think many of you have never actually asked Jesus to clean you, and evangelism does not work if you have not been touched. So ask Him today. Lord, will you touch me, will you cleanse me. If you have been a Christian for decades, ask anyway. The answer is yes. He is willing.

Too many times the church has made itself a place for the clean. Look a certain way, talk a certain way, learn the phrases, and then you can come in. I am done with that, because none of it saves anyone. The touch of Jesus does. When kids come to Trunk or Treat in a scream mask with fake blood down the face, we are not promoting any of it, and we are not telling them to leave either. We want them to meet Jesus. If a kid walks into this church in a costume, praise God they walked into a church. And this is not really about Trunk or Treat. It is about the neighbor of another faith you will not break bread with, as if uncleanness were cooties you could catch over dinner. Eat with your Buddhist friend, your Muslim friend, your atheist friend, and tell them how good God is. You will not be effective. The Holy Spirit in you will be. I am ineffective, praise God, because it was never about me. I am proclaiming Jesus, and He has never once failed to make an unclean person clean. Do you receive the cleansing touch of Jesus? Then go and shout it from the rooftops. Tell your neighbors the Savior has come.

Blog

I grew up being taught that the reason I needed Jesus was how "bad" I was. It was drilled into me from a very early age that I was sinful and full of sinful desires. Everything in my life, at least when it came to church, was measured by how good or bad my actions, my thoughts, and even my motivations were. A lot of my religious experience was driven by a feeling of guilt and shame.

Then, as I learned more about Jesus, I learned that He didn't talk about everything this way. Yes, some things were still morally wrong, but there were also things in the world that were broken and unclean, not because of wrong morals, but because they were no longer doing what God created them to do. When Jesus healed the man born blind in John 9, He explained that it wasn't because this man sinned, or his parents, "but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). It was an opportunity for God to show that He could fix what was broken.

As my kids get better and better at riding their bikes, I've had to learn how to help with their bike maintenance too. Sometimes the chain falls off and needs to be cleaned and lubed up. Sometimes a tire goes flat and the tube needs to be replaced. Sometimes the seat needs to be raised because the kids never seem to stop growing. Sometimes we have to replace the entire bike because they've outgrown it. My kids did nothing morally wrong to cause any of this. Things fall apart because we live in a world full of entropy and chaos.

The wrong way to read Leviticus is to assume that every law and instruction has a moral basis. Leviticus was written to a very specific people, with specific instructions on how to exist in the presence of a holy God. Yes, many of those instructions are moral, but there are also laws that deal with very specific situations for that specific group of people. So when we read Leviticus, we have to understand the clear difference between holy and common, and between unclean and clean (Leviticus 10:10).

The holiness of God points to how He is of a higher order and status than we could ever imagine. It includes His perfect nature, His perfect character, and His perfect plan. That stands in direct contrast to how "common" we are. We have a human nature, a human character, and human plans, and all of them are finite and limited. When the people of Israel are welcomed into the presence of a holy God, they are being invited near to an infinite and perfect God.

Then there is clean and unclean. While clean, the people of Israel are welcomed into the presence of God, but when they become unclean, they are unfit to enter His presence. This is not necessarily a status of sinfulness. It is a status of eligibility to enter the presence of a perfect God. For example, touching a dead body made a person unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:11), unfit to enter the presence of God, and yet it is

not sinful for a man to bury his father. Of course there is overlap between what is sinful and what makes someone unclean, but fault is not what makes someone unclean. Ritual purity is not always the same thing as moral purity.

Leviticus is showing its readers that they are called into this holiness, or better understood, this separation from the other nations of the world. God's holiness is described as separation and distinction from what is "common," and so God gives instruction on how His people are to live their common lives in a sanctified way. That is why He tells them not to eat certain "unclean" foods. It wasn't about bacteria, or about the animals themselves (at least the text never says so), but it tracked how Israel was separate from the other nations of the world (Leviticus 20:24-26). Their ritual laws were not about morality but about loyalty to the instructions their King had given them.

There was nothing shameful or sinful about being unclean. If anything, the law assumes that everyone would be unclean at one point or another in their life. It goes so far as to say that uncleanness spreads by contact (Leviticus 15:5-7). No one is able to remain clean forever, because we live in a world full of both moral sin and ordinary brokenness.

So when someone had leprosy, a skin disease, it wasn't a moral failure that caused it, but because they were unclean, they had to live outside the community (Leviticus 13:46). No one was to touch them, or they would become unclean too, because those were the instructions God had given. The leper had to remain outside the community until the priest proclaimed them clean. The priests were never given the instruction to cleanse and heal anyone. Their responsibility was to proclaim when the disease was no longer present.

That makes Jesus' response to a leper in Mark 1:40-42 that much more significant.

"And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, 'If you will, you can make me clean.' Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean."

Jesus is able to impart His cleanness to someone through His touch. This completely changes the relationship between humanity and ritual and moral purity. Jesus wasn't abolishing the laws regarding purity, but rather imparting His own purity unto people. He does this again with a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years (Mark 5:25-34). She touches His garment, and He imparts His cleanness to her.

Leviticus lays the foundation that ritual purity is required for people to be in the presence of God, which leads to all the instruction about what brings purity and what causes uncleanness. Jesus does not change this, but rather provides Himself as the way

to that same purity. As 1 Peter 1:15-16 says, "but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"

Christ fulfills our ritual purity so that we can grow in our moral purity.

And so the leper, healed of his ritual impurity, goes into the community to spread the news of what Christ has done for him. Jesus had actually told him to say nothing to anyone and go show himself to the priest (Mark 1:44), but a man who had been unwelcome in the community for so long now carried the purity of Christ, and he couldn't keep it in (1:45).

Jesus told that man to keep quiet. After the resurrection, He sends us out to tell (Matthew 28:19). We need to, we must, go out and share how Christ has made us clean.