

LEVITICUS 11-15

Clean and Unclean





Leviticus 11:1-8

Focus Thoughts

The primary meaning of “holy” is to be separated, apart from, distinct. God is initially holy in that he is utterly separate from and completely “other” than every created thing. And herein is the sum total of reality – the LORD who is the creator ... and everything else that he has created. God and his creation. This is reality.

What sort of “other” is he? He is utterly good, morally pure, unblemished in love and justice and compassion. And herein lies the second sense of holiness. The one who is uncreated is also morally perfect. So we understand that to be holy is not only to be separated to God but also to be like God. Thus the LORD commands Israel, at the end of this chapter in Leviticus, “You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”¹⁹

In what ways was Israel separated to God? How was this chosen nation different to all the rest? One explicit way is addressed in Leviticus 11. God’s people were only to eat animals that the LORD declared clean. Unclean animals were not to be eaten. They were to be considered “detestable” and those who ate them were “defiled.”

Camels and rock badgers, hares and pigs, eagles and vultures, owls and bats – these were among those declared unclean. And although commentators discuss the reasons for the distinction between clean and unclean animals (11:1-8), fish (11:9-12), birds (11:13-23) and insects (11:29-31) – perhaps on health grounds (unclean animals were dangerous to eat because they could make people sick), or perhaps on aesthetic grounds (ugly animals were not to be eaten!) – it seems as though the reason was simply that the LORD said so. It was his determination. Israel’s obedience to God’s word was required even when the reasons for obedience were not entirely clear. God said so! That was the reason.

Food laws were not new, indeed the first law ever given to humans was of this sort. In Genesis 2, surrounded by the beauty of Eden, Adam and Eve were told they must not eat of a certain tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This was not because the tree was unpleasant to the eyes and not because the fruit was bad, but because that was what the LORD demanded. His voice was to be obeyed. And now a whole raft of food laws rendered Israel different to all other nations. Automatically, Israelite men and women were restricted in their ease of fellowship with Canaanites or Egyptians, for they could not easily share meals together. Israel was commanded to separate and be different. They were the special, set apart representatives of Yahweh. They were holy to the LORD.

How are young people in our era to be different? How are they to be separated, or in language later used by Jesus, to be “in the world but not of it”? It is not fundamentally through food laws and dietary codes! In his gospel account, Mark makes it clear that Jesus, controversially in the eyes of Jewish people, “declared all foods clean.”²⁰ As on so many other occasions, Jesus probed behind and beyond Old Testament laws, ushering in something far more substantial through the gospel events of his death, resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And in response to Christ, separation is now accomplished not through the external regulations of law codes rather through the transformation of humanness by the Holy Spirit. So it is that in Acts 10 the apostle Peter had a vision that convinced him, although as a Jew he had adhered to



food laws all his life, that not only were all foods henceforth clean, but that God was now willing to indwell people of all nations through the Holy Spirit – Jews and non-Jews, men and women, young and old, crippled and healthy, lepers and prostitutes, all who turned in faith to Christ. No one was barred. All could approach God and be separated to him.

Young people in our times and places face severe pressures to conform to wider culture, to be part of the “in-group,” to be popular. They need to be equipped to live for Christ, even at the cost of rejection and possible ridicule. They need to learn how to be separated to the LORD, how to be in the world but not of it. May we equip them with such courage as we teach them today.

Prayer

LORD, we know that you love the world. Jesus, we know that you died for the world. And yet we see a world that is rebellious and offensive and idolatrous in so many ways. Father God, help us today to be in the world but not of it. Help us to love it as you do and yet to discern its idolatries and brings renewal to its distortions. Help us to restore beauty and truth and goodness to your world. LORD, give us the wisdom that we need to teach and train our children and students also to be in the world but not of it. Guide us as we go about our work today. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Leviticus 13:45-46

Focus Thoughts

Next to leprosy there was death. Only death was worse than the shameful, disfiguring skin diseases that afflicted the ancient world, referred to in books such as Leviticus as “leprosy.” And only rotting corpses were more defiling than the reviled lepers who were condemned to cry “Unclean! Unclean!” as they cowered away from human fellowship and the presence of the LORD outside the camp. One commentator writes:

Imagine what it must have felt like to watch that lesion growing on your skin and to experience dread and helplessness as the symptoms persist. Feel the total despair as the priest diagnoses the condition as “unclean.” You say goodbye, you must assume for the last time ever, to your family, friends, and loved ones. For now you must live outside the camp – cut off from all but other “lepers,” removed from all of the normal aspects of daily life, and becoming, literally, God-forsaken. From now on, you awake every morning with no reason to get up, nothing to do, unneeded and uncared for by anyone.²¹

In Numbers 12, Miriam the sister of Moses was afflicted with leprosy for her rebellious grumbling against her brother. Moses begged the LORD: “Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother’s womb.” He cried on her behalf: “O God, please heal her – please.” Only after seven days of shame, excluded from the camp, was Miriam restored. Leprosy was shameful. Lepers were physically and ritually defiled. They lived in a state of constant uncleanness.

How radical then were the actions of the holy Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth. When approached



by lepers, he did not retreat. When they drew near he was not repulsed. They were not excluded from his presence. Reaching out, he touched their rotting flesh.²² He healed them and pronounced them clean. This radical embrace of uncleanness by hope and power characterised Christ's ushering in of the kingdom of God: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard," he commanded. "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."²³

And at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on all who turned to Christ – Jew and Gentile, male and female, diseased and well. Henceforth the LORD's holy presence would indwell even the most afflicted human beings as they placed their trust in Christ. Even lepers, previously reviled and excluded, were now welcomed into God's holy presence, not merely "close by" but "within" – in their hearts through the Holy Spirit.

In Leviticus, holiness is defined by separation – being separated to the LORD and away from all that was unclean. Uncleanness was infectious. It had to be isolated. Unclean people had to be excluded. Holiness was identified by contrast and preserved by separation and repeated acts of ritual cleansing.

No longer! Something more powerful and wonderful has been set in motion through the gospel. Holiness continues to be defined by separation – separation to the LORD through the indwelling Holy Spirit. However, in this age of spiritual maturity, God's Spirit dwelt people must no longer be characterised by their movement away from rather by their movement towards the infectious and unclean, purposing healing and renewal by the power of the gospel and the Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit among the people of God surely encourages us all to move with boldness into those areas of life and culture that have become defiled, offering transformation and renewal in the name of Christ. As parents and educators, we seek to train up holy, courageous, confident young people for this very purpose. There are risks involved. Wisdom will be needed. However, the gospel of Christ demands it of us.

Prayer

LORD, forgive us for our reluctance to move towards those areas of our world which are scarred, blighted and disfigured, whether leper colonies or impoverished nations or ugly suburbs in the sprawl of our city. Forgive us for not wanting to get our clean hands dirty! Thank you for the Holy Spirit who makes our dirty hearts clean! LORD, help us to have confidence and courage to move towards those areas of need around us with the message of your grace and truth. And help us to raise up young people who will do likewise. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Further Thoughts

No More Hiding – Husaini's Story²⁴

In 1873 Dr. Armauer Hansen of Norway had revealing news for the world: the disease that we know as leprosy was caused by a bacterium (*Mycobacterium leprae*). Until then, the disease was thought to be from a curse or from sinful ways. Leprosy is often now referred to as Hansen's Disease.



The United Nations Human Rights Commission estimated in 2005 that tens of millions of people around the world continue to suffer from leprosy and its consequences of social, economic and political discrimination. Poverty and leprosy are closely related. Those who catch the disease generally have low immune systems. Listen to the story of Husaini, a former leper who was given hope by the care of others. This story is from the Leprosy Mission of New Zealand:

Husaini's life in South Kalimantan, Indonesia, is simple. He lives and works on the river, fishing for shrimp from late in the evening till dawn. He takes good care of his wife and young children. As he limps along the wooden platforms connecting the houses on the river, people wave at him, or stop to chat. They know him as the man who set up the baby clinic, the man who attends important government health seminars in the town. They don't seem to remember him as the man who hid in his hut for years, or the man who would tuck his sarong round his legs so no one could see the wounds he was ashamed of.

Husaini caught leprosy as a child but only received a proper diagnosis and treatment years later. Slowly he lost the feeling in his legs and hands. After repeated injury, a severe ulcer developed on his right foot. Being both resourceful and desperate, he decided to amputate part of his numb foot himself. It didn't help. He was left with a painful infection in his bones, and could no longer walk easily. So for years he stayed inside his hut. ... "I lived with it until a man came and offered me a friendship which brought me my dignity back so I could face life in my neighbourhood," he explains. This man was Alex Mutak, one of The Leprosy Mission's rehabilitation specialists in Indonesia. He arranged for Husaini to have part of his right leg amputated. A prosthesis (false leg) has greatly improved his mobility. Husaini's friendship with Alex has given him better health and confidence. In spite of his disability, he is taking a leading role in the community. With Alex's encouragement, Husaini has set up a monthly baby clinic in his remote village. ...

With the help of a small micro-credit loan from The Leprosy Mission, Husaini set up a shrimp fishing business. He makes about 600,000 rupiahs a month (about £35) which he says is enough to buy rice for his family. Husaini is content with his life now. Yet he is all too aware of the stigma he has had to overcome to find acceptance and respect. "If you want to borrow money from someone, people will say, 'You have a deformity. How can you work, how can you pay back this money?' If you are well people believe that you can work and can do anything. If someone's got a complete body people will not look down at them because you can stand and walk and work."

Having to deal with these attitudes has given Husaini a heart for the weak and the poor. "Sometimes when I see an elderly man or lady I give them big discounts," Husaini says smiling. "If disabled people come to buy shrimp, I say just take it. I only sell to people who have money. After work if I still have plenty I will stop by elderly people's houses and give them the shrimp. Sometimes young mothers say, 'I wish I could buy the shrimp from you.' And I say, 'Okay, just take some.' As Husaini stands at the water's edge with his wife and children by his side, his hiding days are definitely over.



¹⁹Leviticus 11:45

²⁰Mark 7:19

²¹Demarest, G. W. quoted in Rooper, M. F. (2001, c2000). Vol. 3A: Leviticus (electronic ed.). Logos Library System, The New American Commentary (196). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers

²²See for example Luke 5:12-14

²³Luke 7:22-23

²⁴This story is taken from the website of the Leprosy Mission in New Zealand. It was accessed on 10 July 2008 from <http://www.leprosymission.org.nz/index.shtml>