

Leviticus

Chapter 11

Clean and Holy

27.08.2005

In Leviticus 11 God told the Israelites that certain foods and carcasses of certain animals were abominations and had to be avoided. The word *unclean* occurs 34x, and the word *detest* occurs 5x and *detestable* also occurs 5x in the chapter! But *detest* and *detestable* were translated in the King James' Version as *abomination*. Eating pork was an abomination. So was eating Peter Cottontail. And so was lobster, oysters and calamari.

Finding a dead cockroach in your cooking pot meant you had to go berserk and smash the pot. For some people, not much has changed!

For the Israelite, food was divided into clean and unclean.

With modern health concerns, we look at these food lists and wonder if it was a good eating guide. Many have tried, but with partial success, for as of yet, there is no satisfactory medical rationale behind the division.

And if you think that the food laws were only a recommendation, and not a strict regime, then think again. The Israelites took these food laws very seriously. God's people had to be distinctive. They had to be distinctive in what they ate. They had to be distinctive in what they would be prepared to touch.

And these distinctivenesses showed whether they trusted God. Their obedience to the food laws kept them in the state of holiness. They would be holy if they obeyed. They would be unclean if they disobeyed.

Even the apostle Peter, in Acts 10 tells the Lord in his vision of the sheet full of four-footed animals, crawling creatures and birds, that he has never eaten unclean or unholy things.

Faithful Israelites were very concerned with what they could and could not do. If they happened to touch a carcass or whatever was forbidden, they became unclean, but usually only for a short time. Later in Leviticus, there are things listed that make someone unclean for longer periods, such as having leprosy.

But a mistake Christians often make is to think that if someone is holy, then they must be sinless or perfect. In the least, they must have earned this state of holiness by their good works.

However, the Bible calls all believers saints or holy ones (whether faithful Old Testament Israelites, or New Testament Christians). Being holy does not make you perfect. Rather it is a declaration from God. We have died to sin, and now we are to live to do what is right in God's eyes.

If that is true, then why do many Christians consider that holiness is a state of blessedness and nearer to perfection than what is normal? This idea developed through the slightly confusing idea of holiness in the Bible. The confusion was there in the Old Testament, and it is there in the New Testament.

The letter to Colossians shows it beautifully.

1. In the opening statement in verse 2, Paul calls all the believers in Colossae, *Holy*. That is because all believers are declared holy by God.
2. But then in verse 22 Paul says to them that they *will be presented holy without blemish* on the judgement day because of the death of Jesus. So we are holy now, but we will be holy then.
3. And then to complete the picture, in 3:12-14, he again says they are holy, but they are to behave in a way which shows they are holy. Yet in 1 Peter 1:15-16, behaving in that way is said to be how someone is to be holy.

So in Colossians, Paul says we are declared to be holy, by our actions we are being holy and we will be presented holy and blameless on the last day.

The main confusion is that people sort of remember the last part, but they ignore the first part, and focus on the second. ie they think that by doing certain things, they will convince God

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that they should be classed as holy people. Yet that denies so much of holiness, and the mercy of God in declaring us holy, and that we should therefore respond to his grace by living as he wants, until he presents us perfect on the last day.

In Leviticus 11, God declared what was clean food and what was unclean. By choosing to obey, it God's Old Testament people showed if they cared about what God wanted. They could ruin their position of holiness by becoming unclean or unholy. But God did not want them to remain unclean or disobedient. He gave them ways to be restored by certain sacrifices.

However, in the New Testament, Jesus declared that we do not have to follow the food laws. He said in Mark 7:18-19, *Do you not see that nothing that enters a man from outside can make him unclean? For it does not go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body. (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean).*

In the Old Testament, keeping the food laws was part of the distinctive behaviour of God's people. In the New Testament, because of the death of Jesus, the food laws were gone. So what superseded them? In what ways are we to be holy, just as the Lord our God is holy?

Following straight on from those verses in Mark 7, Jesus said *What comes out of a man is what makes him unclean. For from within men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean.*

There are other lists of what God has declared evil, including Romans 1, Galatians 5 and Revelation 21.

The desires God says we should avoid, are the things he declares are evil. Why are they evil? Why are they an abomination? Why are they detestable? Why should we avoid them?

We could argue that they hinder our growth as a people.

We could argue on a historical basis that societies having gone this way in the past fell very quickly.

We could argue that they affect others, and are not loving to them.

Yet the New Testament says that the strongest and most valid reason is that God says these things are evil, so therefore they are evil.

And the evil desires of our heart make us unclean, *i.e.* they tarnish our fellowship with God because they show we do not trust God enough to be different for him.

So what is the basis for Christian morality?

It is based on what God says is right and what is wrong, what is loving and what is not loving, what glorifies Him and what sullies His name. We need to continue to take great care that we know what He has declared is good, and what He declares is evil, otherwise we will end up accepting other standards.

So how can we be holy if we have these evil desires coming from our hearts and flowing into our actions?

In Leviticus, God provided sacrifices as the way to keep being restored to holy living. The Old Testament faithful saint knew he was declared holy by God. Yet they were to obey very distinctive rules from God to remain holy. If they broke them, they were declared *unclean*. Through the sacrifices they were cleansed from their sins, negligences and failures, because they trusted God's way of cleansing.

In the New Testament what do we have? We have the sacrifice of Jesus. And as 1 John 1:9 says, *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

He cleanses us. We are holy. We are the New Testament saints. God declares us holy as we believe in Jesus. He wants us to be holy by

living distinctive lives in line with his command to love, but within the guidelines he has given us in the New Testament. When we fail, as we do, we need to repent, confess and ask for forgiveness, and God will strengthen us to keep on going as his holy children. And our confident hope is that he will present us holy before his glorious throne with everlasting joy.