

In Leviticus 10:10 the priests were told to distinguish between the holy and the profane, the unclean and the clean.

What is the relationship between the holy and the clean?

Consider the things that are called “holy” in Leviticus:

the sanctuary (Lev. 6:16)

the priests

the crown of the high priest (Lev. 8:9),

and the rest of the “holy garments” (Lev 16:4)

the priest’s portions from

the grain offering (Lev. 2:3)

the sin offering (Lev. 6:25-30)

the guilt offering (Lev. 7:1-6)

Later we will hear of the fruit of a fruit tree being holy in the fourth year, and therefore not to be eaten by Israel. (Lev. 19:24),

Also Leviticus 27 speaks of how vows can render a person, or an animal, or even a house, holy to the Lord.

A thing is holy when it is set apart for the Lord’s use.

Indeed, God repeatedly tells Israel, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

The whole community is holy because it belonged to the Lord.

So holiness, in Leviticus, is not particularly an ethical concept, rather it has to do with an objective relationship that a person or a thing has to God.

The concept of “clean” has a different, but related, meaning.

Cleanness has to do with a ceremonial or ritual purity required in order to come in contact with the holy.

Cleanness is a prerequisite for holiness.

Cleanness and uncleanness were not mutually exclusive, and uncleanness was not inherently sinful.

For instance, in Numbers 19:2-10,

the red heifer used in preparing the water of purification rendered the priest who offered it unclean.

The carcass of the red heifer made the priest unclean,

and the ashes of the heifer made the priest’s helper unclean,

but the ashes of the heifer was used in the water of purification, that made people clean.

As Numbers 19:9 points out, “it is a sin offering.”

The priest and his assistant took the uncleanness upon themselves, so that the sacrifice could render others clean.

A person could become unclean by doing anything that rendered them unfit to worship God.
Uncleanness was not merely a spiritual condition,
it was also physical.

Therefore a person who was unclean had to change their clothes and wash.

As we go through this section of Leviticus we will see several different ways
that Israelites could become unclean.

But anyone who was unclean could not participate in the sacrifices of Israel,
or the worship of God.

Some may think that this sort of ritual understanding of cleanliness would have contributed
to a purely external religion.

That was not God's intent

—and the Psalms demonstrate that many Israelites understood the point.

David asks, who may dwell on God's holy hill? (Psalm 15)

“He who walks blamelessly and does what is right.”

Likewise, he asks, “who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?

And who shall stand in his holy place?” (Psalm 24)

He answers: “He who has clean hands and a pure heart,

who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.”

The proper Old Testament understanding of the purity laws recognized
that they pointed to the purity of heart that God called his people to.

As God said through Moses, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

Chapter 11 focuses on animals.

Deuteronomy 14 also speaks of clean and unclean animals.

Leviticus 11 provides the basic principles, which Deuteronomy expands on.

What is the reason for these prohibitions?

The rabbis argued that it was especially for reasons of health;

but if that is the case, then God was most cruel to the NT church,

because he has abrogated this law most explicitly, as we will see later.

There are other reasons that are more compelling.

1) some of these animals were used in pagan religion.

The pig, for instance, was a sacrificial animal

for the Babylonians and ancient Canaanites.

In Egypt and Iran many believed the dog to be sacred,

while field mice were offered as sacrifices in Haran.

The use of a rabbit's foot as a charm is an ancient Arabian practice,

while the owl was revered as a reincarnation of the dead.
Snakes were closely related to the demonic,
and many reptiles had close associations with pagan gods.

But this doesn't provide an adequate explanation.

Virtually every animal had some use in pagan religions.

The cow, the sheep and the goat were commonly used in Ancient religious rites.

So we need to find a better explanation.

2) We come closer to an explanation when we consider the relationship
between "clean" and "holy"

A person had to be "clean" in order to be "holy."

In order to be set apart for the Lord's worship and service,
in order to participate in the covenant blessings,
a person had to be clean.

Your proper function as a member of the covenant community
was to serve the living God.

"Clean" animals were those that fulfilled their proper function.

Leviticus 11 sets forth the "proper function" of the various sorts of animals.

The problem is that the fall has brought all mankind into an estate of sin *and misery*.

We sometimes forget about the misery!

Not really – we are rather miserable creatures!

But we neglect to reflect on how our *misery* creates distance from God.

To be clean means to be fit for the presence of God.

To be *holy* means that one belongs to God. (Morales, 155)

What is clean is closer to the life of God.

What is unclean is closer to death – closer to chaos and misery.

1. Making Distinctions Between Clean and Unclean (v1-12)

a. Clean Animals (v1-8)

And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them, ² "Speak to the people of Israel, saying, These are the living things that you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth.

³ *Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat. ⁴ Nevertheless, among those that chew the cud or part the hoof, you shall not eat these: The*

camel, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. ⁵ And the rock badger, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. ⁶ And the hare,

because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. ⁷ And the pig, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. ⁸ You shall not

eat any of their flesh, and you shall not touch their carcasses; they are unclean to you.

First, Moses speaks of land animals (1-8).

Israel could eat “any animal that has a split hoof completely divided and that chews the cud.”

It is worth pointing out that neither the hare nor the rabbit actually chews the cud, but they both make the same sorts of motions with their mouth.

Moses is not giving a scientific description, but one based on popular observation. So the ox, the sheep, and the goat, along with various wild animals, such as deer, were clean.

It’s important to note that there are *no* unclean plants.

Only animals.

b. Clean Fish (v9-12)

⁹ “These you may eat, of all that are in the waters. Everything in the waters that has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the rivers, you may eat. ¹⁰ But anything in the seas or the rivers that does not have fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and of the living creatures that are in the waters, is detestable to you. ¹¹ You shall regard them as detestable; you shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall detest their carcasses. ¹² Everything in the waters that does not have fins and scales is detestable to you.

Second, Moses speaks of sea creatures (9-12).

The definition of a clean sea creature was that it have fins and scales.

Fish are supposed to have fins and scales.

Israel is being taught to distinguish between clean and unclean, between the holy and the unholy.

They must be different from the nations around them.

And while some of these distinctions may seem a bit arbitrary,

God is doing this for a purpose.

Shellfish and other sea creatures that lacked either fins or scales, are declared “detestable.”

“Detestable” normally refers to something associated with idolatry.

Israel could not worship the Lord and eat shellfish.

To eat lobster was an act of apostasy.

Detestable only appears in two other passages –

both of which connect detestable things with idolatry:

Isaiah 66:17 – “Those who sanctify themselves and purify themselves

to go into the gardens, following one in the midst,

eating pig’s flesh and the abomination and mice, shall come to an end together, declares the LORD.”

and then Ezekiel 8:10 – where the LORD takes Ezekiel in a vision to Jerusalem,

where he sees the elders of Jerusalem offering incense to idols –

“and there, engraved on the wall [of the temple]

was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts,
and all the idols of the house of Israel.”

Likewise...

c. Unclean Birds and Insects (v13-23)

¹³ “*And these you shall detest among the birds; ^[a] they shall not be eaten; they are detestable: the eagle, ^[b] the bearded vulture, the black vulture, ¹⁴ the kite, the falcon of any kind, ¹⁵ every raven of any kind, ¹⁶ the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk of any kind, ¹⁷ the little owl, the cormorant, the short-eared owl, ¹⁸ the barn owl, the tawny owl, the carrion vulture, ¹⁹ the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe, and the bat.*

²⁰ “*All winged insects that go on all fours are detestable to you. ²¹ Yet among the winged insects that go on all fours you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to hop on the ground. ²² Of them you may eat: the locust of any kind, the bald locust of any kind, the cricket of any kind, and the grasshopper of any kind. ²³ But all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you.*

Third, Moses speaks of birds (13-19).

Many of the birds in the list cannot be clearly identified.

The Hebrew names are simply unknown to us.

But the ones that we do know are all birds of prey,

or carrion birds—scavengers that feed upon flesh.

Israel may not eat of any flesh-eating bird.

And then Moses speaks of insects (20-23).

All insects are detestable—except winged insects that walk on all fours,
which have jointed legs—like the locust, cricket or grasshopper.

Again, this should not be taken as a scientific explanation,

because, as you know, there are no flying insects with four legs.

Insects have six legs.

2. “By These You Shall Become Unclean” – (v24-43)

a. Touching the Carcass Renders You Unclean (v24-28)

²⁴ “*And by these you shall become unclean. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean until the evening, ²⁵ and whoever carries any part of their carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening. ²⁶ Every animal that parts the hoof but is not cloven-footed or does not chew the cud is unclean to you. Everyone who touches them shall be unclean. ²⁷ And all that walk on their paws, among the animals that go on all fours, are unclean to you. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean until the evening, ²⁸ and he who carries their carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening; they are unclean to you.*

Verses 24-40 form an interlude.

Verse 41 will pick back up again with swarming creatures (reptiles, etc.).

But these verses explain what to do about the uncleanness

that comes from contact with unclean animals.

To touch an unclean animal, or its carcass, renders you unclean.

It is not a sin to be unclean.

Rather, it means that you are not fit to enter the worship of God.

You did not sin by touching the unclean animal,
but the contaminating contact with that which is not right,
requires purification.

And whoever touches such an unclean animal must wash his clothes,
and remain unclean until evening.

And if a dead unclean animal touches anything, it too becomes unclean until evening,
and it too must be “put into water.”

The earthenware vessel that touches something unclean must be broken,
since you can’t wash the stain out of it.

b. Unclean Swarming Things (v29-31)

²⁹ *“And these are unclean to you among the swarming things that swarm on the ground: the mole rat, the mouse, the great lizard of any kind, ³⁰ the gecko, the monitor lizard, the lizard, the sand lizard, and the chameleon. ³¹ These are unclean to you among all that swarm. Whoever touches them when they are dead shall be unclean until the evening.*

c. Contamination Through Touching (v32-38)

³² *And anything on which any of them falls when they are dead shall be unclean, whether it is an article of wood or a garment or a skin or a sack, any article that is used for any purpose. It must be put into water, and it shall be unclean until the evening; then it shall be clean. ³³ And if any of them falls into any earthenware vessel, all that is in it shall be unclean, and you shall break it.*

³⁴ *Any food in it that could be eaten, on which water comes, shall be unclean. And all drink that could be drunk from every such vessel shall be unclean. ³⁵ And everything on which any part of their carcass falls shall be unclean. Whether oven or stove, it shall be broken in pieces. They are unclean and shall remain unclean for you. ³⁶ Nevertheless, a spring or a cistern holding water shall be clean, but whoever touches a carcass in them shall be unclean. ³⁷ And if any part of their carcass falls upon any seed grain that is to be sown, it is clean, ³⁸ but if water is put on the seed and any part of their carcass falls on it, it is unclean to you.*

Verses 36-38 are particularly interesting.

A spring or a cistern remains clean—

in spite of the contamination of the carcass of the unclean animal.

If God were simply concerned for Israel’s health,

then something should have been said about water

that had been contaminated by any dead animal!

But the water remains clean.

Likewise, seed grain remains clean through its contact with the carcass,

unless it had water on it.

Now that’s odd!

Water is so clean that the carcass of an unclean dead animal cannot contaminate it.

Seed grain is so clean that the carcass of an unclean dead animal cannot contaminate it.

But, if you combine water and seed grain, then it can be contaminated?

Why?

Remember that water is used for cleansing the unclean.

So it makes sense that water cannot be ritually contaminated.

If water got contaminated, how would clean it?

As for the seed grain,

remember Jesus' comment about the seed grain.

Unless the seed dies, it cannot bring new life.

The seed is dead.

You cannot contaminate something that is dead.

But, when the dead seed comes in contact with water,

new life begins to sprout and grow.

So wet grain can be contaminated.

Because wet grain is beginning to come to life!

d. How Clean Animals Can Render You Unclean (v39-40)

³⁹ “And if any animal which you may eat dies, whoever touches its carcass shall be unclean until the evening, ⁴⁰ and whoever eats of its carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening. And whoever carries the carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening.

Verses 39-40 then specify that even a clean animal can make you unclean!

If the clean animal dies – then it becomes unclean!

This is part of why we say that uncleanness is moving towards death –
and cleanness is moving toward life!

e. Unclean Swarming Things Are Detestable (v41-43)

⁴¹ “Every swarming thing that swarms on the ground is detestable; it shall not be eaten.

⁴² Whatever goes on its belly, and whatever goes on all fours, or whatever has many feet, any swarming thing that swarms on the ground, you shall not eat, for they are detestable. ⁴³ You shall not make yourselves detestable with any swarming thing that swarms, and you shall not defile yourselves with them, and become unclean through them.

Then in verses 41-43, Moses returns to the description of unclean animals.

ALL swarming things are detestable.

Every reptile, everything that goes on its belly is detestable, and should not be eaten.

To eat such a creature would be to defile yourself.

This takes us back to the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

Serpents and other swarming creatures are unclean because they defile you.

Why did Moses put this after the section on purification?

Because he wanted to put the swarming animals in contrast to the holiness of God.

Read v44-45

f. Be Holy for I Am Holy (v44-45)

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 holiness of God is contrasted with the swarming things that crawl on the ground.

Eating swarming things would defile yourself.

“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.”

In contrast to the serpent in the garden,

Israel is to be holy.

Eve listened to the serpent.

You are to have *nothing to do* with serpents.

3. Conclusion (v46-47)

⁴⁶ This is the law about beast and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms on the ground, ⁴⁷ to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten.

Read verses 46-47.

It is not entirely adequate to label these laws “ceremonial,”
and then dismiss them as irrelevant.

These food laws have to do with the holiness of Israel.

Those who worship God must be clean.

The New Testament does some interesting things with the food laws.

Look at Mark 7:14-19

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand:

¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.”^[e] ¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the

people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? 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?"^[f] (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."

Mark makes it easy for you.

He states simply that by saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.

But in the very act of setting aside the letter of the Mosaic regulation,

Jesus brings the equity of that law to bear on the believer.

The point of these laws was to teach Israel about holiness,

about being separate from the Gentiles.

And it is no accident that this teaching is followed by the healing of a Gentile woman's daughter.
(Verses 24-30)

²⁴ And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon.^[g] And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden.²⁵ But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet.

²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.²⁷ And he said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."²⁸ But she answered him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."²⁹ And he said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter."³⁰ And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

Mark highlights the connection between these two events.

Jesus did not openly repudiate the food laws,

but he showed that holiness could no longer be defined in Jew/Gentile terms.

In Acts 10:9-15, Jesus comes to Peter and makes this explicit.

Read.

⁹ The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour^[b] to pray.¹⁰ And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance¹¹ and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth.¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.¹³ And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common."

So Peter went to the house of Cornelius, an uncircumcised Gentile,

and the Holy Spirit was given to the uncircumcised.

When the church in Jerusalem hears about this, they are ready to condemn Peter.

So Peter explains in Acts 11 what had happened.

(Verses 17-18)

17 If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" 18 When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

You have been included in Christ

because he has broken down the barrier between Jew and Gentile.

The point of Israel's distinctiveness was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

He was the holy one.

He was set apart for the service of God.

Because Jesus raised clean hands before the Father,

his sacrifice was accepted.

He was the most holy offering to the Lord,

and because God has vindicated Jesus,

and seated him at his right hand,

the OT food laws have become obsolete.

That doesn't mean, however, that they are irrelevant.

Paul applies the food laws to the situation of the Christian in Romans 14:14 and 1 Cor 8:8.

Many Jewish Christians still had tender consciences with respect to unclean foods,

and Paul says that it is true that all foods are clean,

but Christians should respect each other's consciences in this matter.

Modern folk might say, "But Jesus said that all foods are clean!

How dare someone reject the plain word of God!"

But Paul doesn't take that attitude.

If some Jewish Christian thinks of certain foods as unclean, don't make a stink about it.

"For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.

By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died."

Now, Paul insists that the "weaker" brother may not speak against the stronger either!

The implication is this:

Don't eat pork around them.

You can eat pork at home, but don't bring it to the church potluck!

And if he condemns you for eating pork, then he is wrong,

but if you eat pork in front of him, then you are wrong.

This has nothing to do with personal preference.

This has to do with matters of conscience.

But what is all this about?

What is the point of these food laws.

Hebrews 9:10 says that these laws were given until the time of reformation.

Colossians 2:16-23 is more explicit.

Colossians 2:16-17 says,

“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink,
or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”

The food laws were about Christ.

Israel had to learn to distinguish between the clean and the unclean, the holy and the unholy.

They had to understand the contaminating power of the flesh.

God wanted them to see that only the pure in heart could approach him in worship.

Every time an Israelite became unclean,

he was reminded that he needed cleansing.

As he washed his clothes, he would see a picture of washing that he himself needed.

As he distinguished between clean and unclean,

he would remember that he needed to be different from the nations;

he needed to be holy, for God is holy.

But the shadow has passed.

The light of the glory of Christ has now dawned.

We don't live in the shadows anymore.

For us, all foods are clean.

But let us not forget the point:

“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.’” (1 Peter 1:15-16)

It is not what goes into your mouth that defiles you,

but what comes out!