

Why does God give to Israel such a detailed procedure for identifying skin disease?

We use the term “leprosy” – but what *we call* leprosy today didn’t exist in Moses’ day.

The word translated “leprosy” in this passage means simply to be struck, and by implication means to be struck by God.

Any disease which disfigured the skin could be called “sara’at,” and anyone who had such a disease would be quarantined—separated from the community.

This was not due to contagion (there is no mention of that in the text), but rather it focuses again on proper function.

Internal diseases are not in view.

For that matter, contagious diseases are not in view.

Rather, the focus is on visible diseases.

Israel must be clean in order to worship God and partake of holy things.

Therefore Israel must be visibly pure.

If a person has a visible diseases,

then he is rendered unclean, and must be put out of the community.

The picture here is that of the corruption of the flesh – quite literally!

The outward and visible corruption of the flesh symbolizes humanity’s problem.

How can corrupt flesh come into the presence of a holy God?

You can see here how Leviticus understands clearly that the fall brought mankind into *an estate* of sin and misery.

Our problem is not just sin!

Our problem is not just a “soul problem” – our problem also reaches our *bodies*.

1. Clean and Unclean Is Skin Deep (13:1-46)

a. Of Eruptions and Disease (v1-8)

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ² “When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a case of leprous^[a] disease on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests, ³ and the priest shall examine the diseased area on the skin of his body. And if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a case of leprous disease. When the priest has examined him, he shall pronounce him unclean. ⁴ But if the spot is white in the skin of his body and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall shut up the diseased person for seven days. ⁵ And the priest shall examine him on the seventh day, and if in his eyes the disease is checked and the disease

has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall shut him up for another seven days. ⁶ And the priest shall examine him again on the seventh day, and if the diseased area has faded and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only an eruption. And he shall wash his clothes and be clean. ⁷ But if the eruption spreads in the skin, after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest. ⁸ And the priest shall look, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is a leprous disease.

So if you had a rash, or swelling, or spot, or itch,
then you would go to the priest to ascertain whether you were unclean.
The priest would examine you, and then put you in isolation for a week,
and then examine you again.
If your problem did not get worse, then you would be declared clean.
(It was only a temporary blemish, not a disease)

But if it got worse over a two-week period, then you would be declared unclean.

Or – for that matter – if, *after* two weeks it gets worse,
then the priest would declare you unclean.

Again – the point of all this
was because God is opening a way for his people to enter his presence.

But God is holy – and how can humanity enter the presence of a holy God?
Israel needs to understand the distinction between the *holy*
(that which belongs exclusively to God)
and the *common* (that which is for human use).

And the way to do that is to see that within the *common*
there is both the *clean* (that which is eligible for holy use)
and the *unclean* (that which is *not*).

God's holiness impels him to draw humanity into his holiness –
that we might *share* his holiness!

Do you sometimes wonder why God doesn't just welcome *everyone in!*?
Why not save everyone?!

If he welcomes the unclean and unholy into his presence,
then one of two things must happen:

either God's holiness will be compromised –
which would transform heaven into hell –
because all humanity would live forever in a state of sin and misery!

Or God's holiness would triumph –
and when the unclean and the unholy come into his presence,
they would be fried to a crisp – like Nadab and Abihu!

And so our most wise and gracious heavenly Father
decided to take a thousand years to teach his people the meaning of holy and common –
clean and unclean!

b. Of Raw Flesh and Turning White (v9-17)

⁹ “When a man is afflicted with a leprous disease, he shall be brought to the priest, ¹⁰ and the priest shall look. And if there is a white swelling in the skin that has turned the hair white, and there is raw flesh in the swelling, ¹¹ it is a chronic leprous disease in the skin of his body, and the priest shall pronounce him unclean. He shall not shut him up, for he is unclean.

Some have suggested that this is all about hygiene or contagion,
but that cannot explain verses 12-13.

As Moses describes a disease that turns the hair white – and there is raw flesh in the swelling,
then in verse 12 he says,

¹² And if the leprous disease breaks out in the skin, so that the leprous disease covers all the skin of the diseased person from head to foot, so far as the priest can see, ¹³ then the priest shall look, and if the leprous disease has covered all his body, he shall pronounce him clean of the disease; it has all turned white, and he is clean.

So if the disease has turned his whole body white, then he is clean.
And this does not say that it's not really a disease.

The text says very clearly (there is no dispute about the translation!) –
“if the leprous disease has covered all his body, he shall pronounce him clean.”

The point is that a person with a skin disease is mixed up.
He doesn't look right.
But if the disease is so thorough that his entire body is covered,
then he is no longer mixed up.

This makes it clear that hygiene and contagion are not the primary factors in these laws.
This has to do with the visible purity of the OT church.

¹⁴ But when raw flesh appears on him, he shall be unclean. ¹⁵ And the priest shall examine the raw flesh and pronounce him unclean. Raw flesh is unclean, for it is a leprous disease. ¹⁶ But if the raw flesh recovers and turns white again, then he shall come to the priest, ¹⁷ and the priest shall examine him, and if the disease has turned white, then the priest shall pronounce the

diseased person clean; he is clean.

It might be helpful to think about how this plays out in the OT.

There are five cases of leprosy (*sara'at*) in the OT:

Numbers 12:10 – is where Miriam was struck with leprosy,
because of her grumbling against Moses,
and was rendered unclean for seven days.

This is a helpful passage for reflecting on the relation between sin and misery.
Leprosy – skin disease – again, it's not the modern Hansen's disease.

But in this case, Leprosy is seen as a judgment from God against sin.

In 2 Kings 5, we hear that Naaman, the great Syrian general, was a leper.
Plainly the Syrians did not view this as interfering with his military duties!
But Naaman's slave girl – who was an Israelite –
told him that there was a prophet in Israel who could cure him.

So whatever the disease was – it was plainly a nuisance –
sufficient that Naaman was willing to go to seek the help of Elisha!

And it is also worth noting that the *cure*
was for Naaman to dip seven times in the Jordan River!
(Israel entered the promised land by crossing the Jordan)
Naaman can only be cleansed of his skin disease if he washes in the river of Israel.
(A picture of the cleansing power that flows from the river of life –
the river that flows from the heavenly temple –
the river that flows from the heart of Jesus!)

It is noteworthy that a *Gentile* is the first to be cured from leprosy!
And at the end of chapter 5, Elisha's servant, Gehazi, is struck with Naaman's leprosy,
because Gehazi was greedy and took presents from Naaman
after Elisha had declined the.

The Gentile is cured from his uncleanness by faith –
while the Israelite becomes unclean because he fails to believe...

Two chapters later – in 2 Kings 7 –
there are four lepers who discover the flight of the Syrian army.
The lepers – the unclean – then announce the victory of God over the Gentiles
(in contrast to the unbelief inside the city among the “clean”).

Finally, in 2 Kings 15:5, King Azariah (otherwise known as Uzziah),

was struck by God with leprosy for his sins,
forcing him to live in a separate house,
while his son ruled the country.

2 Chronicles 26 tells us that the sin was offering incense in the temple
(something only the priests were supposed to do).

Think about it!

The sin of Uzziah is very much like that of Nadab and Abihu –
offering incense contrary to the Word of the LORD!
and the result is that he is struck with uncleanness.

Because of his sin, Uzziah is rendered *unfit* to enter the ordinary worship of God.

I give this brief survey of leprosy in the OT because I want us to see
how sin and misery connect.

The distinction between clean and unclean is all about who has access to the holy!

c. Of Boils, Burns, and White Hair (v18-28)

¹⁸ “If there is in the skin of one’s body a boil and it heals, ¹⁹ and in the place of the boil there comes a white swelling or a reddish-white spot, then it shall be shown to the priest. ²⁰ And the priest shall look, and if it appears deeper than the skin and its hair has turned white, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It is a case of leprous disease that has broken out in the boil. ²¹ But if the priest examines it and there is no white hair in it and it is not deeper than the skin, but has faded, then the priest shall shut him up seven days. ²² And if it spreads in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is a disease. ²³ But if the spot remains in one place and does not spread, it is the scar of the boil, and the priest shall pronounce him clean. ²⁴ “Or, when the body has a burn on its skin and the raw flesh of the burn becomes a spot, reddish-white or white, ²⁵ the priest shall examine it, and if the hair in the spot has turned white and it appears deeper than the skin, then it is a leprous disease. It has broken out in the burn, and the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is a case of leprous disease. ²⁶ But if the priest examines it and there is no white hair in the spot and it is no deeper than the skin, but has faded, the priest shall shut him up seven days, ²⁷ and the priest shall examine him the seventh day. If it is spreading in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is a case of leprous disease. ²⁸ But if the spot remains in one place and does not spread in the skin, but has faded, it is a swelling from the burn, and the priest shall pronounce him clean, for it is the scar of the burn.

And as we look at the various particular cases in chapter 13,
that’s why it’s the *priest* who is the one making these decisions.

Clean and unclean is not a *medical* evaluation – but a priestly evaluation!
You’ll notice in cases like verses 23 or 28 –

when there is a boil or a burn, that does not render a person unclean.
So it is not just *any* skin problems –
it is particularly skin diseases that render a person unclean.

d. Of Itches, Hair, and Baldness (v29-44)

²⁹ “When a man or woman has a disease on the head or the beard, ³⁰ the priest shall examine the disease. And if it appears deeper than the skin, and the hair in it is yellow and thin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It is an itch, a leprous disease of the head or the beard.

³¹ And if the priest examines the itching disease and it appears no deeper than the skin and there is no black hair in it, then the priest shall shut up the person with the itching disease for seven days, ³² and on the seventh day the priest shall examine the disease. If the itch has not spread, and there is in it no yellow hair, and the itch appears to be no deeper than the skin, ³³ then he shall shave himself, but the itch he shall not shave; and the priest shall shut up the person with the itching disease for another seven days. ³⁴ And on the seventh day the priest shall examine the itch, and if the itch has not spread in the skin and it appears to be no deeper than the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean. And he shall wash his clothes and be clean. ³⁵ But if the itch spreads in the skin after his cleansing, ³⁶ then the priest shall examine him, and if the itch has spread in the skin, the priest need not seek for the yellow hair; he is unclean. ³⁷ But if in his eyes the itch is unchanged and black hair has grown in it, the itch is healed and he is clean, and the priest shall pronounce him clean.

³⁸ “When a man or a woman has spots on the skin of the body, white spots, ³⁹ the priest shall look, and if the spots on the skin of the body are of a dull white, it is leukoderma that has broken out in the skin; he is clean.

⁴⁰ “If a man's hair falls out from his head, he is bald; he is clean. ⁴¹ And if a man's hair falls out from his forehead, he has baldness of the forehead; he is clean. ⁴² But if there is on the bald head or the bald forehead a reddish-white diseased area, it is a leprous disease breaking out on his bald head or his bald forehead. ⁴³ Then the priest shall examine him, and if the diseased swelling is reddish-white on his bald head or on his bald forehead, like the appearance of leprous disease in the skin of the body, ⁴⁴ he is a leprous man, he is unclean. The priest must pronounce him unclean; his disease is on his head.

Likewise, in verses 29-44, the priest is to investigate itches, hair discoloration, and baldness.

Ordinary baldness does not make you unclean –
dandruff does not make you unclean (ordinary itching!) –
so the ordinary process of aging and living does not make you unclean.

Rather, what makes you unclean is reflected in two of the descriptions that we mentioned before:
with Miriam’s leprosy, Moses plead with God,
not to “leave her as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed
when he comes out of his mother’s womb.” (Numbers 12:12).

Likewise, with Naaman’s cure, we are told (in 2 Kings 5:14)

“his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.”

There is a contrast made between the *uncleanness* of leprosy
and the cleanness – the well-ordered flesh of an infant.

Leprosy – this “leprous disease” is a sort of “unformed reality,
the shadow of an unfinished or even reversed creation.” (Radner, 142).

The point is that raw flesh – leprous disease – these unclean skin diseases –
are the undoing of creation –
a returning to the barren wasteland – the *tohu-vbohu* –
of Genesis 1 (before God spoke!).

e. The Unclean Dwells Outside the Camp (v45-46)

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^[b] 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.

That’s why the unclean person must dwell outside the camp.

He is to dress in a manner that makes clear from a distance that he is unclean.

Since touching an unclean person rendered you unclean,
Moses puts a certain responsibility on the unclean
to protect others from becoming unclean.

The unclean person lives alone.

(Though it appears that the unclean would have a sort of community –
as the story in 2 Kings 7 indicates).

2. When “Leprous Disease” Affects Garments (13:47-59)

a. The Test for Uncleanness: Seven Days (v47-52)

⁴⁷ “When there is a case of leprous disease in a garment, whether a woolen or a linen garment,
⁴⁸ in warp or woof of linen or wool, or in a skin or in anything made of skin, ⁴⁹ if the disease is greenish or reddish in the garment, or in the skin or in the warp or the woof or in any article made of skin, it is a case of leprous disease, and it shall be shown to the priest. ⁵⁰ And the priest shall examine the disease and shut up that which has the disease for seven days. ⁵¹ Then he shall examine the disease on the seventh day. If the disease has spread in the garment, in the warp or the woof, or in the skin, whatever be the use of the skin, the disease is a persistent leprous disease; it is unclean. ⁵² And he shall burn the garment, or the warp or the woof, the wool or the linen, or any article made of skin that is diseased, for it is a persistent leprous disease. It shall be burned in the fire.

Verses 47-59 then deal with what to do when this sort of “leprous disease”

affects garments.

It's pretty obvious that Moses is not talking about a single disease – unless, of course, we understand it to refer to the single disease of sin and misery!

As Calvin puts it, God “has surrounded the human race with rottenness, in order that everywhere our eyes should light on the punishment of sin.”

Ephraim Radner adds:

“Leviticus 12-15 deals with a common theme...:
the precariousness, inherent danger, ultimate finitude,
and entrenched temptation to sin that is bound up with being a creature of God.” (p145)

b. If Water Does Not Work, Burn It (v53-55)

⁵³ *“And if the priest examines, and if the disease has not spread in the garment, in the warp or the woof or in any article made of skin, ⁵⁴ then the priest shall command that they wash the thing in which is the disease, and he shall shut it up for another seven days. ⁵⁵ And the priest shall examine the diseased thing after it has been washed. And if the appearance of the diseased area has not changed, though the disease has not spread, it is unclean. You shall burn it in the fire, whether the rot is on the back or on the front.*

And since the uncleanness could be transmitted from the object to the person, it was important to eliminate any disease from garments.

If you can get rid of it by washing, then the garment may be cleansed, but otherwise, the only way to purify the community is by fire.

It's remarkable how frequently this sequence is used in Scripture:

water is frequently followed by fire:
The Flood and the Final Judgment;
Jesus baptism at the Jordan and the baptism of his death;

Start with water – but if water doesn't work, try fire!

c. If Tearing Out the Diseased Portion Doesn't Work, Burn It (v56-58)

⁵⁶ *“But if the priest examines, and if the diseased area has faded after it has been washed, he shall tear it out of the garment or the skin or the warp or the woof. ⁵⁷ Then if it appears again in the garment, in the warp or the woof, or in any article made of skin, it is spreading. You shall burn with fire whatever has the disease. ⁵⁸ But the garment, or the warp or the woof, or any article made of skin from which the disease departs when you have washed it, shall then be washed a second time, and be clean.”*

d. Conclusion

⁵⁹ *This is the law for a case of leprous disease in a garment of wool or linen, either in the warp*

or the woof, or in any article made of skin, to determine whether it is clean or unclean.

When John the Baptist asked if Jesus is the one who was to come,
one of the signs Jesus points to is that “lepers are cleansed.” (Luke 7:22)

God is restoring the outcasts.

Jesus touches the untouchables,
and even stops to eat at the house of Simon the leper (Mark 14:3).
It may be that he cleansed Simon first!
But the point is that Jesus is restoring wholeness – cleanness.

What do we see in Jesus?

Jesus is bringing a new creation!

He is cleansing the unclean –
giving the wretched outcasts a home.

The holiness of Christ is more powerful than any uncleanness.

And so – we should not be afraid of the “contamination” of the world.
We must live in this world, while we remain not of this world.

Do you believe that the gospel has the power to cleanse the unclean?

Then act like it!

In 1 Corinthians 5,

Paul is dealing with certain problems in this area.
The Corinthians had developed a sort of separatism,
where they were afraid that if they came in contact with sin,
it might defile them.

Paul says,

“I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people
–not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world,
or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters,
since then you would need to go out of the world.” (1 Cor 5:9-10)

Paul is encouraging the church to hang out with sexually immoral people.

I think of Harvie Conn,
who spent many years as a missionary in Korea.

He ministered to the pimps and prostitutes,
because he believed that the holiness of Christ
was more powerful than any uncleanness.

He got beat up many times,
but he brought the cleansing power of the gospel to thousands.

So you *should be* spending time with greedy swindlers and idolaters.
NOT ones who call themselves Christians—but with outright pagans.
The holiness of Christ cannot be contaminated by them.
Indeed, the holiness of Christ *decontaminates* the unclean!

In 1 Corinthians 7:14,
Paul makes it clear that the holiness of the believing spouse sanctifies the unbeliever,
so that your children are holy.
The holiness of the believer renders all that you touch holy.
The unclean cannot contaminate you anymore.

A point of clarification: Paul is not saying, pursue temptation!
Paul is saying, “You are holy in Christ.
Therefore be holy in all your contact with these people,
and your holiness will rub off on them.”
Yes, sometimes they won’t like it, and you’ll suffer for your faith.
But a gracious life of holiness has a radiance
that those who walk in darkness cannot help but be attracted to
—even if it also repulses them.

But if all you ever do is hang out with Christians,
then you are practically denying the power of the gospel,
the power of the kingdom of God which has brought about the new creation.