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Eating for God's Glory

Leviticus 11:1-47

Intro: The divine, covenant King of Israel was now dwelling in the midst of His people within His holy palace: the tabernacle. And, as evidenced by the shocking events of ch 10, it was clearly important that the Israelites did not disrespect their covenant King by defiling His dwelling by their ritual impurity. To prevent further outburst of judgment, the priests were tasked with teaching the children of Israel how to distinguish between the various ritual states and, more importantly, how to address their own ritual impurity. The next 5 chapters (11-15) meets this need, describing the various causes of ritual impurity that can occur in everyday life of an Israelite and how to properly address them.

Before we dive into the text, which is rather long, we need to address some issues that will help us understand these chapters better. The first thing we need to clarify is that this section is speaking about ritual states, states of being that determine whether an individual Israelite can participate in ritual ceremonies at the tabernacle. There are 3 ritual states: impure, pure and holy. We should first recognize that the impure state has nothing to do with sin per se', the impure doesn't automatically equate to the sinfulness of an object or person. Another way of describing these states is to say that some things are holy and clean, some are common and clean and some are common and unclean.

Again, common (or profane) are not derogatory terms. That which is common or profane is only bad if it is also unclean but, these are still just categories of ritual status. That which is holy is reserved exclusively for the Lord's use and for use by the priests, Levites and their families. That which is common may still be brought into the tabernacle complex if it is ritually clean but that which is unclean may not. In Leviticus, only the priests are regarded as ritually holy and yet, clean (ritually pure) Israelites could enter the tabernacle courtyard and take part in rituals while unclean Israelites (ritually impure) could not.

These ritual states were meant to guide the community of Israel in knowing which ritual actions a person may or may not participate in or to which ritual

places a person may or may not go. For example, those who were ritually impure could not partake of a fellowship offering, while those who are ritually pure may do so. A modern analogy to these restrictions is that of physical health and cleanness. A person with the flu cannot go into a maternity ward to hold a newborn baby but a person who is healthy can. A person who is healthy can't enter an operating room but a person who is healthy and properly sterilized can. Just as physical health and cleanness determine what you can do and where you can go in a hospital, the Israelite's ritual states determined what they could do and where they could go in terms of ritual actions, places and times.

You may think "What's the big deal?" This is a common modern opinion that stems from regarding ceremonies and rituals of worship as meaningless repeated acts devoid of real value and devotion because they lack spontaneity. On the contrary, to the ancient Israelites, rituals were an important part of their faithful response to God. After all, it was God who commanded and authorized these rituals and when the Israelites observed them, they were simply obeying God's commands. Even today there are protocols that must be observed when entering the presence of royalty, high government officials and even courtroom judges. These worship rituals can be seen as royal protocols the Israelites engaged in to show proper respect, not just for their covenant King but the King of the universe. These rites were intended to assure proper behavior and decorum in the presence of the King.

1-23 – This section provides an extensive (not exhaustive) list of animals that the Israelites are to consider as being ritually pure (clean) and ritually impure (unclean). Every culture has its own way of dividing the animal world and some do this in multiple ways. Israelites were no different. They also divided animals in various ways, 2 of which are found in our text. One addresses the question: "What type of animal is this in terms of habitat?" There are 3 possible answers: animals of the land, water and sky. A 2nd division answers the question: "What type of animal is edible?" There are only 2 divisions: animals that are ritually pure (edible) and those that are ritually impure (inedible). As we'll see later, this division was especially important for the Israelites to heed in order to honor their holy King.

The most perplexing thing for scholars and Bible teachers about this text is nailing down a plausible rationale for the dietary laws. The distinctions

between clean and unclean animals are fairly clear. The real question is whether there is some overriding principle that explains why some animals were deemed to be clean while most are deemed to be unclean. What's the reasoning, the rationale behind the division? Over the history of biblical interpretation, several rationales have been offered up, as you might imagine. One idea is that the rationale is hygienic. The clean animals are safe to eat while the unclean animals are not. This idea has fallen out of favor as of late because some of the unclean animals would actually be healthier to eat than the clean. Besides, if these laws were meant to ensure dietary health, it would be hard to explain why the Lord lifted these restrictions in the NT.

Another suggestion has been that the prohibited animals are ones that were used in the idolatrous sacrificial worship of Israel's pagan neighbors. This theory cannot be taken seriously because the calf was considered a clean animal but it was used extensively in the sacrificial rites of the Canaanite Baal worship. A 3rd suggestion is that these dietary laws, as well as many of the purity laws in following chapters, are merely arbitrary; imposed on Israel by God to see if they would serve Him obediently in observing these laws without having an explained rationale. While our God is anything but arbitrary, these laws were clearly given without any explanation and Israel's obedience was expected.

Another interesting suggestion comes from the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas. She argues that the rationale behind these distinctions has to do with a particular animal's suitability for the environment it was created to be in. Her main theory is that for an animal to be clean, they must conform to the class to which they belong. It is only as they do this that an animal can serve as a symbol of wholeness, completeness, separateness and, thus, holiness. This idea of linking the distinctions with creation is made more plausible since the division in our text actually align with the creation account. Day 1: light from darkness (Day from Night). Day 2: waters above (Sky) from waters beneath (Seas). Day 3: Seas from Land. Day 4: Sun, Moon and stars. Day 5: Birds/Fish. Day 6: animals/ humans.

Ms Douglas's theory states that of the Seas creature, those that have fins and scales are considered clean because they conform to the class in which they belong. For a seas animal to properly qualify as a seas animal, it has to be a fish. Of course, vast multitudes of creature live in an aquatic

environment and do so very well. Just remember, Ms Douglas's classification is not concerned so much with practicalities as it is symbolism. Fish that have fins and scales serve as the perfect example of what is counted as clean among sea creatures. Amphibians are unclean because they symbolically transgress their assigned boundaries, moving in and out of the water. Mollusks and crustaceans, as well as fish with fins but no scales are rendered symbolically unclean because their eating habits are unclean.

With regard to sky animals, for them to be clean they must have wings and 2 legs in order to conform to the class to which they belong. Some that fit this category are still rejected, mainly due to their diet. Raptors and carrion-eaters are unclean because the meat they eat still has the blood in it or is from a dead animal so these birds transgress the law on 2 counts. The birds the Israelites can eat must be law-observing birds! Birds that are clean have 2 wings and they mainly use their feet for walking or grasping a perch. Raptors and buzzards have 2 feet but theirs are mainly used for catching prey. A symbolically clean bird has wings and 2 legs and it eats what birds are supposed to eat.

The rationale on land animals and insects is the same: they must conform to the class to which they belong. For land animals, it's easy to see why predators are prohibited – they eat meat with the blood still in it. The rest of the animals either conform to the class to which they belong (cloven hoof, chew cud) or they don't. Insects seem to exist in 2 spheres: they fly like sky animals and they crawl like land animals. Most all are prohibited (ants, spiders, grubs) but those that fly and have jointed legs above their feet (locust, crickets, grasshoppers). These are seen as distinct from other swarming insects by the text and as such, they are considered to be clean.

As interesting and as comprehensive as this theory is, it doesn't seem to fit every instance or provide a rationale for every prohibition, although it does seem to provide more answers than the others. While no theory offered answers the question of "Why?" to complete satisfaction, it may be that they all contribute in some way to the answer. What we can say for sure is that these restrictions gave the Israelites an opportunity to demonstrate obedience to God, they separated them from their Gentile, pagan neighbors and they helped protect the health of the Jewish people.

24-31 – This section addresses a distasteful, yet necessary, eventuality. Unclean animals, when found dead in the camp, couldn't just be left in the community to rot. But the person tasked with disposing of the carcass of the unclean animal was then required to deal with their own uncleanness. They did this by washing and self-quarantining until evening. They had to bathe, wash their clothes and stay away from others until the sun went down and then they were good to rejoin Jewish society. This meant that if a dead rat or mouse was found in the Israelite camp, it would be carefully and promptly disposed of and the one disposing of it had to take steps to return to a ritually pure status.

This practice would help prevent disease in a significant way. When the bubonic plague (Black Death) ravaged Europe in the 1300s, killing 1/4th of its population, many Jewish communities were largely spared because they followed these hygienic regulations. Tragically, because these communities were often spared the high death tolls from the plague, the Jews were many times falsely accused and unjustly punished for having caused the plague, mostly by professing "Christians." The irony was that the Jews were persecuted for following biblical regulations by those who supposedly loved and lived by the Word of God.

What the text does reveal to us is that this ceremonial uncleanness was not the same as being in a state of sin. No sacrifice was required to remedy the condition of ceremonial impurity. It was merely a state of ritual impurity that needed to be addressed. The only time sin would be involved with a scenario such as this is if the individual refused to properly deal with this condition and attempted to reenter Israelite society.

32-40 – Here we see that it's not only people who can become ritually impure but inanimate objects can as well. If the item can be effectively cleaned with water, then it must be cleaned and quarantined until evening. But if a rodent or lizard were to crawl into a clay bowl, the bowl had to be broken. The idea was that a clay or terra cotta bowl was too porous to be cleaned effectively with water, so it must be broken. This would prevent disease the rodent may have carried from being passed on to the one who would use the bowl. Any food or drink items that were stored in the contaminated bowl must also be properly disposed of, there was no saving it – it was unclean. Cooking utensils were unclean if they were contaminated by dead, unclean animals.

These regulations protected God's people in 2 ways: 1) they gave Israelite households good reason to prevent pests and creeping things from coming into a house. No one wanted to have to constantly destroy earthen vessels or cooking utensils or throw out a lot of food; 2) they promoted a general state of cleanliness in the Jewish home. This certainly contributed to the overall health and the welfare of the Israelite family. By protecting the health of the Jewish nation through these dietary laws, God ensured the continuation and prosperity of His covenant people.

41-45 – Here we have come to the ultimate answer to the question of “Why?” The prohibition against eating anything that creeps on the earth is repeated but the rationale and warning goes beyond mere ritual impurity. Both v**41** and **42** declare these creatures to be an abomination and the Israelites were in danger of making themselves abominable (or detestable) in the eyes of their covenant King if they were to consume them as food. Then v**43-45** form a highly structured statement where the 2nd half mirrors and repeats the 1st half to emphasize the importance of obeying these commands. The prohibition is stated in v**43** and the rationale for it is stated in **44a**: because the Lord is their God. A command is then given: be holy; and the rationale for the command is then given: because the Lord is holy. Then its all repeated again starting in **44b**: the same prohibition; the same rationale (**45a**); the same command be holy; same rationale for the command: for I am holy.

This is the first time in Leviticus we come across the command to be holy. The Israelites wouldn't simply contract ritual impurity by eating these prohibited animals, they would also make themselves detestable to the Lord by their disobedience. This wasn't a position they were supposed to be in because the Lord was not just their King; He was their God, their Creator and their Redeemer and He is holy. Since the Israelites were in a covenant relationship with this holy God, they must avoid defiling themselves in terms of their diet. Holiness and impurity are incompatible.

46-47 – These last 2 verses merely summarize the purpose of the laws in this passage.

So, while all of this is riveting information, how does it apply to us today? Well, it's clear that the Lord gave all these dietary regulations without

providing one speck of rationale as to why or what made one animal clean and another unclean. Apparently, the Lord didn't see the explanation or rationale as being important. Why were the Israelites able to eat beef and fish but not pork or oysters? The only reason they needed to know was because God said so. When God commands; His people obey. In order to obey, all God's people need to know is that God commands. What this passage teaches us first and foremost that, as God's people, we are to submit to God and His Word.

No one likes to hear, "Because I said so!" But, let's be honest, most parents immediately see the futility of explaining the spiritual and practical intricacies of obedience and rebellion to a toddler, so oftentimes, the only reason they will understand is just because I said so. But as they grow older, children want to know the reason for their parents rules. Not so, in our relationship with God. The more mature we become in our faith, the more we are willing to obey unexplained commands. Why? The better we come to know God, the more we trust Him. When we get to know God better by reading His Word and experiencing Him in our lives, we learn that He is always good, loving, merciful, just, righteous and gracious. Thus, we can trust His commands because we know they are for our good and for His glory.

Do you realize that the first regulation God gave humanity also had to do with food? God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree that was in the midst of the garden. Why not? Why did God forbid it? God didn't explain His command to them, He simply expected them to obey with no explanation. When the serpent came along, he offered a vivid and believable explanation. God didn't want them to eat of that tree because it would open their eyes and they'd become like God, knowing good and evil. He claimed that God knew they would become wiser and stronger; suggesting that God didn't want them to grow. He implied that God was an insecure tyrant who wants to keep humanity ignorant and weak. Eve had a choice: obey or disobey. Her choice would be based on whether she trusted God or not. Instead of trusting God, she believed the Serpent's lies about God. People have believed the same lies about God ever since. When we put our full trust in God, we're willing to obey His unexplained commands.

Another result of these dietary regulations was that they'd make God's people different from other people groups. This was important preparation for future events. God gave these regulations to Israel in the Sinai

wilderness, but He was preparing them to enter the land of Canaan. God warned Israel not to adopt any Canaanite ways. These people worshiped idols, practiced every kind of sexual perversion and offered their children as sacrifices to false gods. God was bringing judgment on the Canaanites and Israel's conquest of Canaan was the means of His judgment. Once Israel moved into Canaan, God didn't want His people to mingle with the Canaanites; He knew they were prone to adopting their ways. One way God separated Israel from the Canaanites was by their diet. Since Israel had a special diet, they wouldn't share meals with the Canaanites. Their diet helped to keep them separate, distinct.

Separation from the ways of the world is also a NT principle that followers of Jesus are to observe. God commands us to love the people of the world as He loves them. He also commands us not to love the sinful ways of the world ([1 John 2:15-16](#)). If we love and worship God and follow His ways, we will not love the ways of the world. A separation will always exist between those who follow Jesus and those who don't know Him. We are separated from the world because God, His kingdom and His righteousness are most important to us and those things are not at all important to the world. We are also separated from the world by our lifestyle, just as Israel was separated from other people by their diet. No matter which Testament you're in, God intends His people to be different and distinct, separate from the world. Israel observed a special diet, we observe a holy lifestyle that separates us from unbelievers.

Ultimately, our goal as God's people is to seek to reflect His holiness in our lives. Why are we to be holy? Because our God, our Savior, our Redeemer is holy and He wants us to be like Him. In fact, He saved us so we can become like Him; He gives us His own Holy Spirit to do the work of transforming our lives into His image. We're to be holy as God is holy. God created us in His image but that image has been marred by sin. The image of God begins to be restored in us when we're reconciled back to God by Jesus and we embrace God and His ways. As we put away sin and draw close to Him, we become holy for He is holy.

First God redeems us. He saves us from sin when we put our faith in Jesus; He comes into our lives and makes us new people by giving us a new nature. Then God tells us, "Now that you're different, act differently. Jesus has made you into new people, act like new people. Be who you are. In your

daily life, live out your new identity in Jesus. Be holy!”

Even though, today, we don't observe the these dietary laws, since all foods have been declared clean ([Acts 10:15](#)), we still stand under the command to be holy. This holiness must manifest itself in every area of our lives.

We may think we have it easier than the Israelites and, because of God's grace to us in Christ, we do. But, all that aside, we are no less responsible than them as the Apostle Paul reminds us in [I Cor 10:31](#), “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” □