

Leviticus Bible Study #13

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 11:1-47

1 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.

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.

13 “And these you shall detest among the birds; they shall not be eaten; they are detestable: the eagle, 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.

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.

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. **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.

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.

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. **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.”

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.

Introduction

Here our Lord gives dietary restrictions for the Israelites to follow, what they can and cannot eat. He addresses Moses and Aaron together, as Aaron has been charged with educating the people: he and his sons are expected to instruct and catechize Israel so as to perfect their living before our Lord. This begins with food just as Leviticus itself began with the sacrificial system. The priests must eat and so shall the people; as the priesthood eats holy food, the people must also have a diet that is set apart in some sense.

The dietary regulations have caused some debate. Various thinkers have posited that these rules provide a healthier diet, as the prohibited animals include disease-ridden creatures like vultures and dung beetles.¹ Others have claimed that the food laws were intended to mark Israel as *distinct* from their pagan neighbors.² The latter is more accurate, as the intended distinction between Israelites and Gentiles is plain from this chapter's command to be holy (and therefore *separate*).³ At the same time, God did not command these differences for differences' sake, as though accidents in description were sufficient. To the contrary, the unique diet had a *point*, a message preserved by a lifestyle in line with the principle of *Shalom*. *Shalom* is not just peace but wholeness as well. When a place is sacred to God, the intent is for things to be the way they ought to be: no conflict, disease, oppression, or death. Though the Israelites lived under the same curses as everyone else (death, pain in childbearing, toil),⁴ the way they lived was intended to *show* the other nations that worshiping the true God and living righteously resulted in greater outcomes for everyone involved, a kind of mitigation for the curse on creation.

1 One notable proponent of the “hygienic” view is theologian R.J. Rushdoony:

<https://www.thechristianphilosophyoffood.com/2012/12/rushdoony-on-dietary-laws.html>

2 This is the standard, majority view. Popular “Bible Questions” websites forward this view flatly and plainly:

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-foods.html>

3 The command is revisited more than once. Leviticus 19:2, 20:24

4 These are of course the curses on mankind from Genesis 3.

Vs.1-12

1 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.

When it comes to eating the meat of mammals, the Israelites find their choices limited to that which would appear on the altar for sacrifice. It is no coincidence that the chapters concerning animal sacrifice include goats, rams, and bulls: by commanding Israel to only eat those mammals which chew the cud and have cloven hoofs, they express communion with the God who consumes the same animals on the altar. While God is not *actually* eating the animal sacrifices,⁵ it illustrates a kind of relational connection between our Lord and the Old Covenant people, as if He were to say “you eat what I eat.”

An animal that “chews the cud” is a *ruminant* eater. The plant matter they eat goes to a special organ to ferment, from which they regurgitate to re-chew and absorb more nutrients. Since most ruminants have hoofs, the hoof requirement helps to identify such animals as safe for consumption. As they are herbivores whose digestive system maximizes the nutrition of their own food, ruminant animals like cows and goats call back to the Edenic state, when Adam was capable of living on fruits and vegetables alone.⁶ As Eden was briefly the epitome of *Shalom*, such animals are prized for being able to live this way.

The stipulations are strongly stated, allowing for no confusion nor half-measures. The requirement for a full split to the hoof prevents camels from being legitimate meat livestock. Pigs, which have only one stomach, do not chew the cud as they are omnivorous; this takes away from the purity of the animal. While hares and hyraxes do not chew the cud in the same fashion as cows, their distinctive digestive practices “count” in the eyes of the Law but their unhoofed paws make them prohibited. All this is to say, the requirements force the Israelites to pay attention to what they are slaughtering so they may be more diligent to obey the Law.

Vs.9-23

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.

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All fish are permitted for consumption but not all aquatic life. The Israelites are commanded to see amphibians, mollusks and crustaceans as detestable, most likely on account of their scavenging

⁵ Psalm 50:12-15

⁶ Genesis 1:29

living. Such creatures do not, in the mind of an ancient Israelite, truly have *meat* on their bodies so much as they have collected detritus, sediment, mucus, and shells. A fish however has an actual portion of meat to its body: even if one of them might have a “bottom feeder” diet, they still produce the plenty that is proper to right eating and a life of *shalom*.

Regarding fowl however, diet is a larger factor than what is seen with fish. All birds that eat other living things and carrion are prohibited, including the omnivorous ostriches and sea gulls. Bats are included, as it is a list of flying creatures, not specific to birds themselves. This effectively restricts eating fowl to those who eat insects and plants, giving them a similar *clean* quality to cud-chewing mammals and meat-bearing fish, while also sharing characteristics with the birds sacrificed on the altar. The only insects permitted are those who eat plants exclusively as well. With the exception of fish, all of the permitted food animals are herbivores: if the Israelites are to embody *Shalom* to their neighbors, then the animals they dine on must be those which live close to an Edenic state.

Vs.24-38

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.

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“Unclean” does not just mean unsanitary. Someone who is unclean has participated, whether knowingly or not, in the detritus of the fallen world around them. If there wasn't a fall, there would be no need of scavengers or carrion feeders, creatures whose very existence reminds us of decay and death. The Israelite by contrast must stand for life, detesting such reminders. As the New Testament will explain, death is an enemy to be defeated, meaning it was not even intended to be a feature of creation:⁷ the current manifestation of the created order reflect adaptations that never should have happened.

To *eat*, let alone to touch these animals then, is to present as someone who accepts and promotes these dour changes to creation. St. Paul explains that to eat is to proclaim,⁸ and the proclamation of ancient Israel was a fellowship with God rather than death. This is not to be taken as a condemnation of the animals themselves, whom God created in the first place. Christ declared all foods clean,⁹ meaning that it was never about health or curse that those under the Law were so restricted. It was more that,

7 1 Corinthians 15:26

8 1 Corinthians 10:14-25

9 Mark 7:19

since eating is a symbolic gesture of fellowship, the people preached. Meat is just meat, but when meat is offered to an idol and a believer publicly takes some of it, that is a declaration of acceptance toward idolatry. In the same way under the Old Covenant if an Israelite were to eat pork or carrion, then his conscience was made unclean by the association with death and curse. Now that Christ has redeemed us from sin, death and the devil, we have the freedom to associate with and even befriend those animals which were once considered detestable.

To be unclean is to live or act apart from God's initial design for humanity, thus disrupting sacred space. The children of Israel are here instructed to wash in order to *regain* that pure state of affairs in accordance with *shalam*, the principle of restoration. Theologically this means that they were always striving to be in right relationship with God and one another. Practically, this entailed having a highly hygienic culture, one in which men, tools and storage were all regularly washed. Yet more importantly, this use of washing to regain a right relationship with God prefigures Baptism.

Vs.39-47

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.

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. **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.”

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.

Continuing with the general theme of rejecting death and curse, the people are forbidden from eating that which dies naturally (although permission seems to be granted for emergencies). More curiously, God also includes a peculiar reference. Before they are given reasonable commands to abstain from eating “swarming things” on the ground (e.g., ants, vermin, termites), the children of Israel are forbidden from consuming “whatever goes on its belly.” Doubtless, He refers here to the serpent, which was cursed to go on its stomach.¹⁰ To eat this would make the believer as detestable as a madman who decided to eat millipedes or maggots. In other words, they are not just bound to avoid the trappings of a cursed world, but in addition they reject eating snakes who represent the dread *source* of the curse, the tempter in the Garden.

The chapter is summarized with the simple command, “You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” The tribes of Israel were intended to represent God to the rest of the world in every facet of their lives. A pagan visiting the land should be able to learn about the true God by seeing the behavior of His followers, from what they ate – having similar foods to the animals on the altar – to how they treated one another. To be a people set apart, they were to function as appointed image-bearers to an ignorant world enslaved to sin.

¹⁰ Genesis 3:14