

The Need for Holiness
Leviticus 11:1-12, 41-47

So, why should we care about this long list of animals God said His Old Testament people weren't supposed to eat? After all, didn't our responsive reading tell us that Jesus declared all foods to be clean? So, why don't we enjoy some bacon-wrapped catfish while we get back to the New Testament?

Well, before you turn the page, remember something else Jesus said about the Law of Moses: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (Matthew 5:17). That's from the Sermon on the Mount. And later on, when confronting His critics, Jesus made this bold statement: "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me" (John 5:39).

So that means that, somehow, in some way, Jesus fulfills even this very strange passage of Scripture. Somehow, some way, even the Old Testament food laws point to the Person and Work of Christ. So, instead of asking why we should study this passage, or any of the Old Testament ceremonial law, we should ask, "How does this passage point to the life and the ministry of Jesus?"

Well, let's start by taking a closer look at this list. For why would God have called these particular animals "unclean"? Why would God tell His people not to eat them, or even to touch their carcasses (11:24)? Noticing that pigs and bats are forbidden, we might jump to the conclusion that God was mainly concerned with His people's health. After all, it would be hard for ancient people to avoid or treat diseases such as trichinosis or rabies. And wild rabbits can carry tularemia. But what's wrong with a little pelican or ostrich meat, I mean, if you like that sort of thing?

We can't be exactly sure, but we do know that many of the animals labeled as "unclean" were associated with or came into contact with death, in one way or another. Pigs and eagles, for example, are rather opportunistic about what they eat, and neither would turn up their noses at carrion. Catfish and shrimp don't have fins or scales, and both are bottom feeders. Even ostriches have been known to eat bugs and lizards in a pinch. In sum, it seems that God's people were not supposed to run the risk of eating animals that ate other animals, or that came into contact with dead things.

In contrast, the only land animals they were allowed to eat were those that have cloven feet and that chew cud: animals like sheep, cows, and, as Mississippi hunters know very well, deer. Such ruminants don't eat animals, but instead graze on grass and browse on shrubs. Their diet is strictly vegetarian, much to the dismay of the farmers and gardeners around here. How high was that fence that Robert St. John had to build to keep the deer out of his rose garden?

So, as best as we can tell, it seems that the Old Testament food laws pointed to the need for God's people to avoid death, and things associated with death. But why was that so important?

Well, the answer becomes clear when we take the rest of the ceremonial law into account. For from the very beginning of the Book of Leviticus, we learn that, in order for any sin to be forgiven, death was necessary. No sacrifice of money or crops, no matter how valuable they might have been, would do. Over and over again, we read that forgiveness required an animal to be killed so that its blood could be shed.

And Leviticus chapter 17 explains why such bloody sacrifices were necessary: “For the life of the flesh *is* in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it *is* the blood *that* maketh an atonement for the soul” (Leviticus 17:11).

Yes, God’s ceremonial law was anything but subtle. For whenever anyone sinned, he had to bring an animal to the Tabernacle or Temple. He had to put his hand on the hand of the animal, identifying himself with it. And then he had to watch the priest kill the animal, and throw its blood on the altar. He had to smell the smoke of its burning body rise up into heaven. No, it would be impossible to escape the essential meaning of such a violent ritual: every sinner deserved exactly what happened to each animal sacrifice. Because every sin is an expression of rebellion against God Almighty, every sinner deserves the death penalty.

And so, since death is the inevitable result of sin, it made sense for God’s Old Testament people to stay as far away from death as they could. This is why they were only to eat “clean” animals, those that in turn avoided death in their diets.

So much is clear, but what does all this have to do with Jesus? Well, we know that all those Old Testament sacrifices pointed, in one way or another, to His supreme sacrifice. We know that His is the Blood of the Covenant shed to pay the penalty that all our sins deserve. We know that we can only be made clean and whole, forgiven and freed from the power of sin and death by being washed in the Blood of the Lamb.

And that, at root, is why Jesus could declare all foods to be clean. The reason we can enjoy bacon-wrapped catfish with a cup of crawfish bisque on the side is because by His cross, He has fulfilled all the Old Testament ceremonial law. And so, if we are trusting Christ as our Savior and bowing the knee to Him as our Lord, we no longer have to rely on all those Old Testament object lessons to point us toward His atoning sacrifice for our sins. Instead, we can simply look back at the cross in awe and wonder, praising Him for His faithful, unconditional, self-sacrificial love for us.

But we mustn’t stop there. For remember, God’s Old Testament people not only had to offer animal sacrifices to atone for their sins. By what they ate, they were also expressing their intention to avoid any contact with anything that was even slightly connected with death, and thus with sin. This was one of the ways that they sought to consecrate themselves, to set themselves apart from the sinful world and devote themselves to the glory of God alone, pursuing the holiness of life that is appropriate for those who worship a holy God. As the Lord Himself told His people in verse 44: “Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am holy.”

So, do these food laws tell us anything about our own pursuit of holiness, the way we should seek to live once we have been washed in the Blood of the Lamb? Well, what did Jesus tell us at the very time He declared all foods to be clean? He said, “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” (Mark. 7:15). And He went on to explain what sorts of things really make someone unclean: “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark. 7:21-23).

Yes, Jesus has raised the bar for what it takes to pursue holiness, hasn’t He? For yes, God’s Old Testament people had to practice what amounts to an object lesson, avoiding any foods that had a connection to death, and thus to sin. But God’s New Testament people are called to go even further.

Because the death of Christ has set us free from bondage to sin and death, we must avoid even the impure thoughts and feelings that might lead us back into the sin from which we have been redeemed. And so, while we don't need to avoid pork and catfish anymore, we are called to do something much more difficult: to reject as unclean any of the sin that caused Jesus to go to the cross for us.

Now, it was frankly impossible for God's Old Testament people to avoid uncleanness altogether, and thus to remain perfectly holy. For it wasn't just certain foods that made people ceremonially unclean. No, chapter 12 tells us that good and necessary activities like childbirth made people unclean because it involved the shedding of blood, which again pointed to the loss of life that sin requires. Just so, Jesus makes it clear that we are all defiled, made unclean by the angry, covetous, lustful, proud thoughts that all of us have, whether we want them or not.

And so, just as God's Old Testament people had to repeat their animal sacrifices time and time again, we must continue to flee to the cross, pleading the blood of Christ to cover our sin, to wash us and make us whiter than snow. For we are saved, not by anything that we do or leave undone, but by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Make no mistake – only Christ can wash us clean and make us holy.

But just as God's Old Testament people could stay away from the food that pointed to death and sin, so we can do our part to put away the remnants of sin that remain even within those who have come to Christ in faith. And so, while we pray for Jesus to continue to sanctify us, to make us holy by the power of His Holy Spirit, we must willingly participate in the process of sanctification, seeking to align our wills with His, to live as He lives, to love what He loves and to do what He does. We must seek to avoid the reality to which the Old Testament food laws pointed: the sin within all of our hearts that leads to death.

In short, it is not enough for Jesus to forgive us for our evil thoughts, sexually immoral acts, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. We must actively turn away from each and every one of those thoughts, feelings, and actions, rejecting them as completely as God's Old Testament people rejected animals they were told were unclean.

And no, this may not always make sense for us: after all, even the modern rabbis say that there's really no way to know exactly why God put all those animals on the "unclean" list. Just so, we may never be able to make sense of all of God's laws. In today's world, for example, many people reject the idea that God would consider any sort of sexual attraction to be out of bounds. And how many of us Southerners really object to deceit or slander, specializing as we do in half-truths, spreading rumors while masking them with a veneer of politeness? And while we might not want to sit in church with a thief or a murderer, how many of us gloss over the covetousness or pride that is all too common in our neighbors, or even in ourselves?

But if we believe that Jesus is our Lord and King, aren't we called to obey Him, even when His Word doesn't make sense to us? If we believe that Jesus shed His blood to pay the penalty our sins deserve, shouldn't we at least try to avoid adding to the burden of sin He carried on the cross?

So, no. We don't need to follow all the details of the ceremonial law anymore. But let's seek to do in a spiritual way what all those rituals sought to teach God's Old Testament people to do: to flee to Christ, relying only on His sacrifice for us, and responding to His grace with joyful obedience. For how else can we hope to be the holy people that a holy God deserves to worship Him?