Cleanliness

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 March 2021

Preacher: Alistair Chalmers

[0:00] Amen. Well, folks, if you have that passage open in front of you, we're going to be dipping in and out of it this morning. But I want to start off by asking you a question. What makes a person unclean?

Now, I guess it depends on their life circumstances. For example, I always considered myself to be a clean young man. Always showered, always wore clean clothes. I'm generally quite a tidy and organized person.
Even when I worked on a farm, I would come home and intentionally leave my stinking work clothes that smelled like pigs, sheep and cattle outside the house.
So that that lovely smell didn't come into the house or into my bedroom. I thought that I was generally a clean and tidy person. But then something changed.
I moved away from home into a flat share for a few years. And then I married my wife, Sabina. And I realized that there are very different ideas of what cleanliness meant.
[1:07] Sure, I could organize things. I could have things tidied away. But there is much more to cleanliness than just appearance. Even now in our flat, when I cleaned, Sabina jokingly or not so jokingly, asked me to which standards I cleaned.

Hers or mine? We all know that there is a difference between something being clean and something being dirty. Let's use the language of Leviticus.
Something that is clean or unclean. If we see something dirty today, we probably just wipe over it with a cloth, throw it in the washing machine or if it's us, we jump in the shower.
But it wasn't all that simple back when Leviticus was being read to the nation of Israel. And the terms clean and unclean had a lot more significance and consequences than they do today.
Now remember that big idea of the whole book of Leviticus. That God is holy and that the nation of Israel are not.
[2:14] These laws were given so that the people, to show the people what needed to happen for a holy God to dwell with an unholy people. And to understand our passage this morning, we need to look at the book ends of it.

So turn to Leviticus chapter 10 verse 10. And we get a part of the job description of a priest, which is to distinguish between the holy and the common.
Between the unclean and the clean. And then in chapter 16 verse 16, we see another important role of the priest. He will make atonement for the most holy place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites.
And so in chapter 10 of Leviticus, we're told about a distinction between clean and unclean. A person's cleanliness is about ceremonial cleanliness.
Meaning whether or not they were able to join in the corporate worship of God as he commanded them to in the Old Testament laws. So being unclean means that a person is not able to enter the tabernacle.
[3:32] And worship God because he is holy and he cannot dwell with uncleanliness. And then in chapter 16, we're told that it is through sacrifices the people's sins are atoned for.

And they are made clean. So the big question between these bookends is, well, what makes people unclean? If God is holy and cannot dwell within unholy people, then what hope is there for us?
We need to find out exactly what makes us unclean and how to change that so that God can dwell with us. And Leviticus 11 to 15 teaches us all about what makes the nation of Israel unclean.
And there are two things. What goes in and who you are. So the first thing we see in this passage, which makes a person in the nation of Israel unclean, is what goes in in chapter 11.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-18 15:26:05

What goes in. So chapter 11 is basically a list of the animals that the nation of Israel were not permitted to eat. In verses 1 to 8, the list of land creatures is given.
[4:49] So there are no bacon butties, sadly, no camel burgers to be found in the nation of Israel. In verses 8 to 12, the list of water creatures is given.

Verse 10 says they were not permitted to eat anything that did not have fins or scales. So sorry, guys, if this is your cup of tea, no lobster dinner or crab snacks to be found in the nation of Israel. And in verses 13 to 23, the list of flying creatures and insects is given. So no ostrich steak and no seagull soup on the menu at all.
And I'll let you decide if you think that God not allowing his people to eat some insects is a good thing or not. I've only ever intentionally eaten a fried insect once and it was not a pleasant experience.
But do you see the repetition in verse 7, 12 and 23? The things that God says are not permitted are unclean and detestable to the people.
[5:54] These animals are to be avoided at all cost. Because uncleanliness permeates everything.

Looking at that list, I thought back to Genesis 1 and 2, where God created the world and said that everything was good. So why are there certain animals that the nation of Israel aren't allowed to eat or touch?
We don't know why God chose the pig to be unclean and the fish to be clean. There is no reason for it other than God says so.
But what we do know is that God is holy. And that's why the nation of Israel are called to be different. We see that in verses 45 to 40, 44 to 45.
Read with me. God says, do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves along the ground. I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God.
[7:00] Therefore, be holy because I am holy. God is telling the people that they should follow these food laws. That they should be ceremonially clean because of his holiness.

The nation of Israel are being called to be distinct. Separate from the world because of the God they worship. But God isn't being a killjoy and just taking away bacon butties for no reason.
God isn't calling these unclean animals evil or sinful. But these laws were to act as an illustration for the Israelites.
That they were to be different from the world. So imagine this scene. A family sit down for a meal one evening. And the table is full of food that complies with these food laws.
But one of the children pipes up and says, dad, my Canaanite friend down the road is currently enjoying a hog roast with his family. And I smelled that pig being roasted on the fire.
[8:07] And oh man, did it smell delicious. Can we have some of that for dinner tomorrow night? No son. The dad replies. We can't eat pork. We can't eat pork because the amazing all-powerful God who saved us from slavery in Egypt.

The amazing holy God who was provided for us through and whose presence dwells in the tabernacle. The amazing God who calls us to be his people has asked us to be distinct and different from the world.
That is the whole point of these food laws. God is calling his people to be different. To be pure. To be clean. And every single meal is an illustration of that.
Every meal was a conscious decision to eat specific things and live according to God's will. To be able to worship him. Every bite was a decision to be obedient and follow God's law.
What does this mean for us today? Christians are not bound by these food laws anymore. And we need to understand why. Often when speaking with non-Christians, the food laws can come up.
[9:24] And we're maybe accused of cherry-picking parts of the Bible that we find comfortable or we like. But there are very good reasons that we do not need to follow these laws anymore.

In the New Testament, for example, in Mark chapter 7, we see Jesus saying that a person isn't made unclean by what goes in. But by what's in our hearts.
We are no longer under the Old Covenant as the Israelites were. But we are in the New Covenant under Jesus Christ. And God confirms that under the New Covenant, the people of God, Christians, don't need to follow these laws anymore.
God says this in Acts 10, where he confirms to Peter in a vision that all the animals are clean and allowed to be eaten.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-18 15:26:05

So Christians are not bound by these food laws anymore. And I, for one, I'm thankful for that truth because I do enjoy a bacon butty on a Saturday lunchtime.
[10:28] But the principle behind these laws is the same and still applies to Christians today. We are to be different from the world around us and to live distinct lives.

This won't have much to do with what we eat, but it will affect the other things we consume or use our time up with. 1 Peter, that was read by Archie to us earlier, picks up on this and we have the same command.
Be holy, God says, because I am holy. That same call to holiness exists today because God is still holy. And we are his people.
Christians are to live in such a way that glorifies God. We are called to deny ourselves and take up our cross. To die to self and live for Christ.
So this will affect the way we speak. The things we do, the things we fill our minds with. If our work colleagues are gossiping about the boss, we are to be different.
[11:40] If our family or friends are doing something that is contrary to the Bible, we are called to be different. If our world is on a path that deviates from the Bible on so many areas, we as Christians are called to be different.

Friends, Christians are called to be in this world, but not of this world. And this will look different for each of us, but the principle is the same.
We are to be different because we serve a holy God and because we are to be holy. And we'll hear more about this holiness in two weeks time. But God is saying in Leviticus chapter 11, nation of Israel, you must be distinct.
And every single meal is a reminder of that difference between you and the world. But like Jesus says in Mark 7, being unclean is not only a matter of what goes in.
It is a matter of what comes out, what is in the heart. It goes much deeper. So the second thing we see in this passage that makes a person in the nation of Israel unclean is who you are.
[12:54] In chapters 12 to 15, who you are. Now chapters 12 to 15 are full of laws and details that might make some of us blush.

Laws about childbirth, skin diseases, leprosy on the body, mildew on clothes and leprosy in a house. And lastly, laws about bodily discharges for both men and women from their genitals.
Now let me start off by saying that these laws are pointing to the fact that the Lord's people are not made unclean only by external things.
But these laws show that the people of God by their very nature are unclean and therefore God cannot dwell with them. Now we won't cover everything in these chapters, but let's look at chapter 12 together.
After a mother gives birth to a child, they are considered ceremonially unclean and unable to join in corporate worship. Only after a time of purifying was the mother able to go to the priest who would sacrifice an animal, a lamb for those who could afford it, or two doves or pigeons for the poor.
[14:10] And atonement would be made and they would be considered clean again. Now there are two questions we have to deal with here. Firstly, you'll see from verse 3 and verse 5 that the time of purification is double for the mother who gives birth to a girl than it is for a boy.

Why? When we maybe read this kind of thing today, we might think about gender bias or ask the question, is God being sexist?
Well, that's not what's going on here at all. We don't know exactly why this is the case, but one reason could be that the daughters might themselves become future mothers.
And therefore have the same discharges. However, we don't know for certain, but this is not discriminating against girls because the way to be made clean after giving birth to a boy or a girl is exactly the same through the blood of a sacrifice.
We also know that throughout the Bible, God explains that he sees men and women of equal worth and dignity. Now this is a very big and very relevant topic.
[15:31] So if you'd like to talk about this afterwards or ask questions, please do get in touch with me. I would love to chat to you about it. The second question we need to ask is why?

Why are women being called unclean after giving birth when God created them with the capacity to have children? Well, the problem clearly isn't the pregnancy or the child.
No sacrifices were required at any point during the pregnancy. And we see later on in the Bible that these were the same rituals that Mary had to do when she gave birth to the perfect son of God,

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-18 15:26:05

Jesus Christ.
God is not punishing women for their ability to have children. After all, it was God who created them with that ability. But it is to be a reminder to women and to the whole family, the whole household who would be affected by these laws.
That uncleanliness comes from within a person. The uncleanliness seems to originate from the bodily discharges.
[16:49] And we'll look at those in just a minute. So chapters 13 and 14 are all about skin diseases and impurities. Mold and mildew in clothes.

Leprosy on a person and in a home. These laws on physical purity highlight the holiness of God and the necessity for purity in every aspect of life to be able to have a relationship with him.
Now, the pattern is essentially the same throughout. And we'll see an example of this in chapter 13. It's kind of like I was going to see a doctor today. We might find a blemish on our skin.
And so we dive into action. Verse 2, we call the priest and we have our appointment. Verse 3, we get the diagnosis of what the issue might be. And verse 4, we go into isolation for seven days to see if it clears up.
And we're pretty used to the idea of isolating by now, aren't we? And then verse 6, if it improves, then you are good to go. You can return back to normal life in Israel.
[18:01] And verse 7, if there is no improvement, you circle back to verse 2 and you start again. Now, all of these things in these chapters are normal. And they would have affected every Israelite.

Uncleanliness has permeated all of society from the youngest to the oldest. Every Israelite had to ask themselves the question, am I clean or not?
Have I done something that means I can't worship God as he wants me to? Spots and blemishes, impurities of the skin, rashes are often part of everyday life.
So why is this here? Why did God put this here for the people of Israel? Well, to highlight the fact that it is not only external things that make you unclean, but it is who you are naturally that makes you unclean.
And the uncleanliness permeates the whole of life. And the Israelites needed atonement. But now it gets more interesting as we turn to chapter 15.
[19:10] Here we read laws about bodily discharges for both men and women to do with their genitals. We don't need to be embarrassed by our bodies or ashamed of the things that they naturally do or produce.

The reality is that God created our bodies and he knows and cares for every aspect of our lives. So in verses 1 to 18, we see they're about bodily discharges for men.
And verses 19 to 30 are about bodily discharges for women. Both containing sections of normal and abnormal uncleanliness. Sacrifices only needed to be made for the abnormal bodily discharges mentioned in this passage.
But there were still isolation periods and the charge of uncleanliness with normal bodily functions. So for example, verse 16 is about an emission of semen.
Kind of like a wet dream that a teenage boy can have. And verses 17 to 18 is about sex between a husband and a wife. Verses 19 to 24 is about a woman's menstrual cycle.
[20:25] These are normal bodily functions that are not sinful. After all, our bodies were created to do these things naturally. But they are reminders to the nation of Israel of their uncleanness.

Which prevents a holy God from dwelling with them. Sex, semen, periods, bodily discharges during pregnancy are not unclean because they are bad.
Or because God is being prudish. They are unclean because a person has lost fluids that contain, create and sustain life. The reason atonement needed to be made for the abnormal discharges, deadly skin diseases, discharges during pregnancy, was because they had the potential to lead to death.
Death and life cannot mix. Therefore, an unclean person cannot enter God's holy presence because God is life.
That's what God says in verse 31. You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so that they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them.
[21:49] All of these things were to act as a daily reminder to the people of God that they are naturally unclean. And they need to be made clean. It was a constant reminder because their

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-18 15:26:05

apparent cleanliness didn't last long at all.

The sacrifices didn't make them clean forever, but just until the next thing happened that made them unclean. It was a reminder that they were to be different from the world around them. Separate, distinct, set apart by God. And all of this points to the need of a greater sacrifice, a greater atonement, and a greater cleansing.
The people deemed unclean by all of these things would feel on the outskirts of society for a period of time. Unable to join in normal life, but Jesus comes and meets those people in the outskirts.
He meets both a leper and a bleeding woman in their isolation and their pain in Luke 5 and 8. And he shows them love and compassion and he heals them with a touch.
[23:01] These were people who were deemed unclean by the law, but Jesus touches them and makes them whole. Friends, the Bible tells us that we are all naturally born unclean.

We're no longer made unclean by these things mentioned in Leviticus 11 to 15. But we are made unclean by the sin that is entrenched in every single human heart.
Each of us has sinned and rebelled against God. And so we're not worthy of his holy presence in our lives. So whilst these laws about spots and bodily discharges don't apply to us under the new covenant anymore, the principle is still the same.
We are naturally unclean and therefore a holy God cannot dwell with us. The Old Testament sacrifices were not sufficient to cleanse a person.
That's why it needed to happen again and again and again. But now. Jesus, who was and is the perfect Lamb of God, being God in the flesh, took our place on the cross.
[24:13] He made the perfect, the final atonement for the sins of the Lord's people possible. And so what does Peter say in 1 Peter 1 that was read to us earlier?

We have been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ and that through him we have been set apart, made pure, called to be lights to the people around us.
Friends, do you see that even though these specific laws don't apply to us today, the principle is the same. For a holy God, to dwell with an unholy people, we must be cleansed.
And a cleansed people must be different from the world around us. And we need to call them to him because he is holy and he wants to dwell with people.
So if you're listening in this morning and you are a Christian, you have been made clean by the blood of Jesus Christ.
[25:19] And the amazing news continues because God doesn't dwell in a tent near your house or in a church building in your community. You have the Holy Spirit, God the Spirit living within you.

And this means that we have a responsibility to run from sin, to come in repentance to a holy God, and to live godly lives as he calls us to in 1 Peter 1, 13, where it says this, Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.
As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.
For it is written, be holy because I am holy. Christians have been made clean through Jesus. And we are called to live clean lives for him and through the power of the Holy Spirit.
And we are called to take that wonderful news of reconciliation with God, of purification from sin, of freedom from judgment to the watching world that is dying without knowing him.
[26:41] All of this should lead us to thank Jesus and to go into the world and spread the good news. Our holiness should, must lead to evangelism.

Well, maybe you're listening to this and you're not a Christian. Well, let me be honest and say that the Bible says that in the eyes of a holy God, you are unclean. You're unclean because of the sin that resides in your heart and because you are rejecting of God.
The Bible presents you with that problem. But God also gives you the solution in Jesus Christ. Will you listen to this merciful, gracious God who calls you to follow him and to be made right through Jesus?
Think back to how our standards of cleanliness change maybe as we go through life. In reality, none of that matters. The only cleanliness that matters is whether we are clean in the sight of a holy God and whether we have been made right through the sacrificial death of Jesus who made atonement for our sins.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-18 15:26:05

Let's pray. Father, we come before you in recognition that we are sinful, that we are naturally unclean and not deserving of your presence.
[28:13] And yet we thank you that in your infinite grace and mercy, you sent your son Jesus Christ to be the perfect sacrificial lamb who would not only atone for sins for a wee while, but who made our atonement final, who made it possible for us to become sons and daughters of the living and holy God.

Father, no amount of words in any language under the sun could explain how thankful we are for Jesus.
And it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-18 15:26:05