

3. Too hot to handle (studies in Leviticus) - The Earth is the Lord's

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[0 : 00] And now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at Leviticus 11, and we'll have a word of prayer together. God our Father, we realize very acutely the need of your Holy Spirit to guide us.

That same Spirit who inspired those words is that Spirit who now, by your grace, will take these words and lead us to Christ himself.

And so we pray that as we draw near to you, you will most graciously draw near to us, that you will open your word to our hearts and minds, and that you will open our hearts and minds to your word.

In Jesus' name. Amen. One of the great blessings of the Gospel is that it is a shield, a support, in tough times.

When tragedy comes, when disaster strikes, when difficulties abound, we know that we have a hope as an anchor of the soul, as the letter to the Hebrews says.

[1 : 15] And we appreciate that strength that it gives us to help us to keep going in tough times. But we must never forget, the Gospel is also for the everyday, for the routine, for the mundane, for the ordinary irritations, the ordinary joys and sorrows of life.

And that's what we're going to be looking at this morning for some moments in Leviticus 11 to 15. If you looked ahead at these chapters, or indeed if you read them before you came, you will think these are thin pickings.

I said last week, and some of you were surprised, that the book of Leviticus reminds me of the ending of a James Bond film, with everything exploding around the hero, with danger, with keep out, with do not enter everywhere.

This may seem rather like raking over the embers of a dying fire, these chapters. I hope that by the time we come to the end of the service this morning, you'll think differently.

Let's say something first of all about the place of these chapters in the book. This is our third study in Leviticus, and we come to the third main section of the book.

[2 : 30] And these chapters together are often called the Purity Code. Not the Holiness Code, we come to that next Sunday evening, but the Purity Code. The people had been rescued from Egypt.

Moses had been ordered to build a tabernacle, a tent of meeting, where God would meet with them, where they could worship him. Moses had taught them that they needed sacrifice to approach God, and we looked at that last week, seeing how sacrifice is both God's gift and our response, and how they needed priests to lead them into that sanctuary.

And that's why here in chapter 11, verse 1, the Lord speaks not only to Moses, but to Aaron, who has just been ordained as the high priest. Now we're leaving the sanctuary and going out into the world.

This is very much Monday morning stuff. This is not high drama. This is what it's like for people who have been redeemed, who have approached the Lord, living in the world.

Notice it is the word of the Lord. The Lord spoke to Moses. As I said last week, when the Lord speaks through Moses, that is authoritative and remains authoritative.

[3 : 41] But there is a problem, isn't there? You might agree, I'm sure you will, that sacrifice and priesthood points to Christ. In other words, the chapters we looked at last week, and the Day of Atonement in 16 that we'll look at this evening, it's easy enough to see how these point to Christ, illustrate for us the work of Christ.

What about these chapters? They've been called the least attractive chapters in the Bible. And also, we made things more difficult for ourselves by reading Romans chapter 14, where Paul appears to be saying, these chapters have been set aside.

We don't need to bother about them any longer. In other words, they're not only obscure, but they appear to be antiquated. In Romans 14, Paul says, the kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking.

In other words, it's not about whether, I doubt very much actually, if anybody has had a camel burger, or eaten the great kite, or the great owl in this past week. But Paul says, that's not what it's about.

It's not about eating and drinking. It's about righteousness and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. And in Acts chapter 10, Peter has a vision of a sheep descending from heaven, including both clean and unclean animals, and he's told to go and kill them and eat them.

[5 : 01] It's not just clean and unclean animals. Chapters 12 and 15 talk about purity and the physical world, including giving birth bodily fluids and mildew in houses.

Now, that doesn't appear to be very spiritual, does it? Chapters 13 and 14 speak about skin diseases, including leprosy. What on earth is all this about?

Why are we looking at these chapters? Now, one point needs to be made right away. Holiness and unholiness are not identical with cleanness and uncleanness.

They are related, but they're not identical. By definition, anything that is holy is clean, but not everything that is clean is holy. To be holy or to be unholy is about our basic standing before God, whether we are forgiven, whether our sins have been cleansed by the blood of Christ, which is illustrated here in the sacrifices, and particularly in the Day of Atonement.

To be holy is to have our sins forgiven, washed away, cleansed. So it has to do with sinfulness. We are sinners, but we are also fallen.

[6 : 22] We are part of a fallen world. Let me illustrate what I mean by this. For example, a baby born in Uganda with the AIDS virus is clearly not personally guilty for that.

That is something that is inherited because that baby is born into a fallen world. Or to take a less dramatic example, dirt in the garden is a very good thing, but not a very good thing on the dining room table, and so on.

We do make these kind of distinctions in everyday life. And the interesting thing is this. When you read through these chapters and look at the rituals dealing with purification, that is to say those rituals that deal with cleanness and uncleanness, the priest pronounces words of cleansing, but not a word of forgiveness.

That is the important thing. When us, as sinners, we need to be forgiven. But as part of a fallen world, we need to be cleansed.

So these chapters are telling us not only that we are sinful, but we live in a fallen world, and we share in that fallenness.

[7 : 42] Illness, disease, accidents, all these kind of things are part of fallenness. Not necessarily part of our own personal sin. Of course, it is possible to have a disease which is brought about by our own personal indulgence or carelessness.

But most diseases are not brought about by that, and so on. So we have here a series of object lessons of purity and impurity, of holiness and unholiness, could I illustrate that a little bit further?

In a sense, what we've got here is God teaching, if you like, the alphabet of purity and impurity, of cleanness and uncleanness to people who are in the childhood of their faith.

Now, a child learning an alphabet is not in the same situation as Shakespeare. But Shakespeare was only able to write his plays because he learned the alphabet. You see what I mean?

A child learning to count is not in the same situation as Albert Einstein. But Einstein's brilliance was possible because he did learn to count, and that was still valid.

[8 : 50] And perhaps even more so, a child learning not to tell lies is not in the same position as a world leader who has to make decisions based on integrity, but the important thing in each of these cases is the elementary has to be learned.

So let's keep that in mind as we try to navigate our way through these chapters. I've called this sermon today The Earth is the Lord's, taking it from Psalm 24.

I want to say three things about these chapters. These chapters, this is the Word of God to us, and they are teaching us at least three things. And the first thing they are teaching us is that God is the Creator.

Everything seen and unseen comes from the hand of God. And that's tremendously important. And that is a practical doctrine.

It's not just a theory. It's not just a philosophical or theological idea that you debate in a seminar room. If God created everything, then God is in everything, and God is everywhere.

[9 : 55] And the language, especially in chapter 11, recalls Genesis chapter 1. And we remember that Moses wrote both this chapter and Genesis chapter 1.

That's scarcely surprising. In Genesis chapter 1, the picture of creation is of order of classification. He made the birds after their kinds, the animals after their kinds, divided light and darkness, divided earth and water, and so on.

So, once again, Moses is reminding the people here, the Creator, when he made everything in its order, that is still a truth that we need to grapple with.

It's a reminder also of the covenant with Noah and with all creation in Genesis 9. The earth is the Lord's. God is the Creator. Now, first of all, let's say something about the clean and the unclean animals.

Now, this is the result of the fall. In the early creation, there were no clean and unclean animals. This is the result of fallenness.

[11 : 03] Now, many people have attempted to find a rationale for the clean and the unclean animals. For example, health and hygiene. Some have pointed out that particularly pork and rabbit can transmit diseases.

Now, that's absolutely true. But there's no prohibition on eating mushrooms, for example, many of which are poisonous. So that can't be the basic, the fundamental thing, although God is clearly concerned with health and hygiene.

These matter to God. Sometimes it's been argued they're symbolic or allegorical. For example, pigs are associated with dirt and therefore they're unclean.

Maybe. But I wouldn't have thought storks and owls were particularly associated with dirt. and they are also unclean. But I think we get the clue to it once again from Genesis 1.

Remember, Moses in Genesis 1 says, the created order in the unfallen creation everything had its place. Now, because of fallenness things move out of their place.

[12 : 13] Categories become blurred. Let me just give you one example of what I mean. In verses 20 and following, all winged insects that go on all fours are detestable to you.

You may, and yet among the winged insects that go on all fours you may eat those and so on. Probably not something that's ever been a great temptation to any of us.

Nevertheless, it illustrates the point. Insects which both walk and fly transgress the original created order which makes earth creatures and air creatures and so on.

And therefore, Moses is giving the people an object lesson of how God's original order in creation is still valid. Now, the particular details are set aside in the New Testament but the principle of God making everything in its place remains.

And that will be a feature, no doubt, of the new creation where everyone and everything in that new heaven and earth will be perfectly adapted to its environment.

[13 : 18] I think that's so important. This is an object lesson. This is an illustration that when God made everything good, it was exactly as he made it to be.

And because of fallenness, he wants to give people illustrations of that. But it's also telling us something about the nature of the earth itself that we live in.

What kind of a world do we live in? Now, once again, the key to this, so much else in Scripture is an understanding of Genesis 1-3. In Genesis 1-2, we have a beautiful unfallen world, a world which is good and is very good.

Now, we can still see that, can't we, in our world? A moonlight night, a walk on a spring morning, the beauty and wonder of the created order.

But created order also has tsunamis, dust bowls, cancer, all these things that destroy life, all those things that cause hardship and disaster.

[14 : 23] Because the world is under a curse, it is fallen. And that is the theme of the book of Ecclesiastes, vanity, futility, everything is futile because creation itself is fallen.

These are the realities, I mean, the kind of things that he's talking about here, eating, childbearing, illness, decay, these are the realities we live with.

There's much realities in our world as they were in the world of Moses. We live with these realities. So I think he's saying two things. First of all, fallen people in fallen bodies can still glorify God.

That's one of the things these chapters are saying. And through Moses and Aaron here, God is giving guidance to those people in that early stage of the history of God's people how to do that, how to be object lessons of God's purity and holiness in the world.

That includes things like skin diseases, mildew in houses, bodily fluids. How often have you heard sermons on those subjects? Probably not at all.

[15 : 34] But they're here in these chapters because these are realities of the world in which we live. Since Christ has died and risen again and opened the kingdom of heaven, these specific regulations have gone, but the principles remain.

The principles continue. But the second thing he's saying, it's pointing forward to the time when the resurrection body will be free from fallenness.

What is it that Paul says? As Paul says in Philippians, we await a saviour who will change our, not our vile bodies, that's a mistranslation in the authorised version which suggests our bodies are intrinsically evil, but will change our lowly bodies, and the word lowly means bodies subject to fallenness and the curse, will change our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body.

The regulations have gone, but God's commitment to creation remains. Now, as we went through the early chapters of Genesis, Willie pointed out how in Genesis chapter 9, for example, the covenant with Noah, with creation, reaffirms God's commitment to that creation that he made and points forward to the day when it will be glorious.

So that's the first thing then. These chapters are teaching us that God is the creator. Second thing is these chapters are teaching us that God is holy. Now, these verses we read at the end of the chapter, 41 to 45, verse 44, I am the Lord your God.

[17 : 05] Consecrate yourselves and be holy, for I am holy. Then verse 46, 45, I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Notice, not a different God from the God of Sinai, the God who gives the Ten Commandments, the God of the sacrifices.

This is the same God. Be holy, for I am holy. The covenant God, the Lord, who not only saves his people from Egypt, not only saves us from our sins, but calls us to a lifestyle that reflects his own.

And what these chapters are saying is that physical cleanness often reflects inner cleanness. Psalm 24, whoever has clean hands and a pure heart.

Now, that's not a kind of Pharisaic legalism. Remember, Jesus condemned the Pharisees for cleansing the outside of the jar and leaving the inside polluted.

He compared them to tombs which were painted white, glittering, and yet were full of bones and deadness.

[18 : 14] What he's talking about here is the way in which God is concerned about us as people, as bodies, not just as souls. We have to chapter 12, purification for childbirth.

Now, if you read the commentators on this chapter, you'll find that many of them, including some conservative commentators, say this reflects a primitive view about the uncleanness of women and the uncleanness of sex.

Now, that clearly is not the case because if you read Genesis 1 and 2 again, the command to be fruitful, the command to procreate is given in the unfallen world.

What happens after the fall is not that sexuality and childbirth become sinful, but they become associated with fallenness and therefore with pain.

Now, it's a very, very different thing. And the question here is of ceremonial cleansing. Now, verse 6, when the days of her purifying are complete, whether for a son or for a daughter, this is chapter 12, verse 6, she shall bring to the priest at the end of the tent of meeting a lamb, a year old, a pigeon and a turtle dove.

[19 : 30] And notice verse 8, the same principle as we saw last week in the sacrifice. If she cannot afford a lamb, God asks what we have, not what we haven't. Now, the point is, when you think of the hazards of childbirth in ancient times, the huge incident of infant mortality, this is a kind and generous regulation in order to protect the woman.

It's not saying a woman is inferior or the sexual act is impure. It is simply saying that in the fallen world, there must be protection. And similarly, skin diseases and mildew in houses are not evil, but they are an example of fallenness.

They are an example of living in a fallen world, which is marked by decay and death. And so these regulations point beyond themselves to the new creation.

So, you see what's happening here. God is saying, look, I'm holy and I want you, I want to show you, spell out to you by these object lessons in the very ordinary business of your life what this means.

But the important thing to remember is, for us, holiness remains vital. 1 Peter 1 verse 15, you don't need to look it up, says this, since it is written, you shall be holy as I am holy.

[20 : 54] What is Peter quoting from? He's quoting from Leviticus chapter 11 verse 44. He's saying, the principle remains. The sanctuary reflects God's holiness.

We saw that last week. Holiness, says Psalm 93, befits your house for endless days. See what these chapters are saying. It's not just the sanctuary.

It's true also of the kitchen, true of the office, true of the lecture room, true of the classroom, true of the bedroom, indeed any room in our lives, both literal and spiritual.

One of the old hymns talks about the chambers where polluted things hold empire for my soul. You see, holiness remains, not just for the sanctuary, but for every other room of our lives.

God is the creator. God is holy. But the third thing this chapter seems to me to be saying is that everything matters. What matters to God?

[21 : 59] You must wonder this sometimes. When we bring our little prayers to God, how come the creator of the universe, the God of the spiral nebulae, the God of the galaxies that can't even be seen by our most powerful telescopes, does that God care for us?

Well, this chapter appears to me to be saying, if God cares about mildew in houses and skin diseases and clean and unclean animals, is there anything that he doesn't care about?

Is there anything that's beyond his providence? Remember, Jesus says, not a sparrow falls to the ground without your father. Usually the translations say without your father knowing.

There's no word for knowing. It's the whole of the providence of God centered around these things. And this seems to me, if everything matters, that seems to me to be saying two things to us.

First of all, it will give us a sense of gratitude. God made, God planned everything. these regulations have gone.

[23 : 05] We don't, when we go shopping, take our, take what we, what we buy in the food counters from these chapters. Nevertheless, the principle remains that God provides, that God meant it for good.

Remember, Joseph says this in a much more broad context, the context of God's providence throughout generations of a family's life. But here, even in these mundane matters, God meant it for good.

And God provides when things go wrong. You see, the, Genesis 1 verse 1, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

These chapters say God is still committed to them. And the New Testament says that although the administration of these laws may change, he's still committed to it. There will be a new creation.

You know, we know regulations in heaven about mildew in houses because there will be no houses with mildew. There will be no, there will be no notice boards up in heaven saying, do not murder.

[24 : 11] It will be rather difficult to do that with resurrection bodies. Nevertheless, the point is, the fallenness, the sinfulness, will be gone. But the holiness and the love remains.

So, this sense of gratitude. But the second thing, it seems to me, is a sense of liberation. Now, these chapters can seem like stifling legalism.

Absolutely everything has a law applied to it. Is there nowhere in my life where I am not governed by a law? Now, we know that when our Lord was here in his earthly ministry, that was exactly what had happened with the Pharisees and the other Jewish teachers.

And not even specifically about these regulations, they had added a whole multitude of other regulations. They had tried to make everything in life be governed by a rule, by a law, by legalism.

Now, that has often been a great temptation for the Christian church. It has often been a great temptation for evangelicals to retreat into a ghetto and to have the kind of mentality, everything is forbidden even if it's permitted.

[25 : 24] The idea that everything is wrong and everything must be trapped in external conformity. See, the danger about legalism is it's very easy to be a legalist because if you obey certain regulations, then that's great.

On the other hand, it's also easy to go to the opposite extreme and say, well, everything goes. That's not what these chapters are saying. There is another way to look at these chapters and I believe it's the right way.

I think the way to look at these chapters is to say, there is no moment, there is no place, there is no activity, however mundane or trivial, which cannot be blessed by God and cannot be done for him.

Remember that when you're washing the dishes, when you're hoovering the room. As George Herbert, the poet said, a servant with this clause makes drudgery divine, who sweeps a room as for thy laws makes that and the action fine, however trivial.

Everything can be blessed by God, everything can be done for him, everything can build holiness which will last into eternity. We are building day by day as the moments pass away, a temple which the world cannot see and every victory won by grace will be sure to find a place in that structure for eternity.

[26 : 54] So as we finish, God is everywhere and in everything. He cares everywhere and in everything. Secondly, we need to avoid the kind of super spirituality that tries to escape from the body and from the mundane.

Christ saves us not just as souls but as bodies and one day in the new creation we are going to have new bodies which are like his. And finally, these chapters have their place in the big picture.

You're probably not going to hear many more sermons on these chapters so remember what these chapters are saying and remember that as we leave here and go out into the routine business of our lives, God made it, God loves it and God cares for it.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, how we thank you for your word.

Your word that goes from the heights of heaven to the very depths of the most ordinary. Your word which not only gives us guidance in the big things but in the small things.

[28 : 10] your word which tells us that everything about you cares for us and our lives are planned by you and that you mean it for good.

And so we thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.