

"A Holy People To The Lord"

In our society today, what people eat sometimes can be seen as a social class thing. For example, white bread versus wheat bread. Today, white bread is statistically much more commonly eaten by the lower classes. Wheat bread is much more commonly eaten by the upper classes. The same is often true of other foods and drinks. The types of restaurants that you go to, can be a class thing. Sometimes even the grocery stores you shop in can be the same way. Certainly if you live in or around Marin, this is something that you've probably personally recognized.

Now I don't mean to commend all the negative aspects of this. Certainly there is a degree of arrogance and snobbery that is inherent in this reality, often from both sides. But I wanted to start out our sermon today with this as an analogy. People today might eat certain things, and not eat certain things, as an expression of their status. Of who they are.

Well, in a positive sense, there was an aspect of this in play here in the old covenant. Here God was calling Israel to show forth their holy status by what they did and didn't eat. Now again, this isn't snobbery by God. That's where my analogy breaks down. But to be a people holy unto the Lord has ramifications. And as is so common in the old covenant, God was giving the people external, outward ways, to show forth who they were. These laws about clean and unclean foods were part of how God was calling the people to very visibly show that they were different. That they were set apart from all the other nations.

Now under the new covenant, these food laws are no longer binding on us. Paul says in Romans 14:14, for example, that he's persuaded in the Lord Jesus that no food is unclean in itself. Jesus called us to see how these food laws find their fulfillment in the work he does on our insides, to cleanse us inwardly. We'll talk about that today. But first let's look then at these food laws in the old covenant. Let's think about how these relate to the people's holy status, and why God chose certain foods to be clean or unclean. Doing that will help us to understand the underlying principle that finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

And so let's begin by thinking about these categories of holiness and cleanness. The bible makes these different distinctions. Distinctions between holy and unholy and distinctions between clean and unclean. Holiness and cleanness are two different things, but closely related in Scripture. Cleanness in the old covenant usually had to do with ceremonial cleanness. The people could only come to worship God if they were ceremonially clean. And the book of Leviticus flushes out all the ways the people could become ceremonially unclean and what they'd have to do to become ceremonially clean again. Once they became clean, then they could resume in coming before God at his holy temple to worship God in his holiness.

Well, here, this passage relates holiness and cleanness. Here it focuses this cleanness on something fundamental that they did; their eating; on what they ate. And it says that these food restrictions were related to their holiness. Look at verse 3. You shall not eat any detestable thing. That's the overarching command. But then look at verse 21. It ends out this whole section on eating with the holiness rationale. "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God. That's the reason why they weren't supposed to eat any detestable thing. Because they were holy unto the Lord. So they should only eat clean things.

Think of these categories of holiness and cleanness in light of righteousness. These distinctions of clean and unclean animal can't be boiled down to some strictly ethical requirement. There's nothing inherently moral about eating a pig or not. There's almost a sort of arbitrariness that appears at first glance. And yet when

God commands his holy people not to eat of these things, then it becomes a matter of sin for them if they disobey. You might think of this like the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. There was nothing inherently wrong with the fruit of that tree that would make it sinful in itself to eat of it. Before Eve took of that tree, she even looked it over and saw that it was good to eat. It obviously wasn't a poisonous tree. But when God commanded them not to eat of it, that made it a sinful thing to do. What otherwise would have been a perfectly good thing to do, becomes sinful if God tells you not to do it.

I think this is part of what's involved here in verse 21. God says that they cannot eat of anything that naturally dies. They were free to give it away or sell it to a foreigner. But the holy people of Israel weren't to eat it. Surely if it was inherently sinful to eat something unclean, God wouldn't want the foreigners to eat it either. But for Israel it would be sin now to eat of these forbidden things. Because God had told Israel that their special status required their eating to be different than others.

You see it all comes back to their holiness. Who they were meant they now had a sort of higher standard. Verse 2. "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." This is the same thing that God said back in chapter 7, verse 6. Now he reiterates it here. They were holy unto the Lord. That meant in part that they were God's chosen ones and God's treasured ones. They were holy; set apart as God's own. They were being called to resemble that and reflect that even outwardly; even by what they ate.

And since they were holy unto the Lord, this makes sense. God is all pure; all clean. No stain or filth in him. As God's people, to really be in his presence, they themselves needed to be all clean; for how could the all clean God tolerate any uncleanness in his sight. Of course, the old covenant is full of physical, outward, signs of Israel's state before God. God dwelt with them, so they had a physical temple representing that. God blessed them, so they have a physical Promised Land that he sent earthly blessings to show that they were a blessed people. And God had made them holy choosing them to be his own special people, and that therefore required cleanness and purity. In similar fashion, God was choosing to show this cleanness in very physical, outward, ways under the old covenant.

And what more fundamental to show forth Israel as a clean people than by what they ate? This is something that most people do at least three times a day. We rarely, if we have a choice, miss a meal. Eating is a fundamental thing we do. And here God's calling for sanctified eating. Their eating was to be set apart like they had been. This is not to say that all their meals were holy meals. Chapter 12 distinguished between holy meals and ordinary meals. Holy meals were to be done in that central place of worship God would choose in the Promised Land. Ordinary meals could be done back at their homes. But as people who were overall holy people, both their holy and ordinary meals must be clean. Again, they had a higher standard because of their status. Their cleanness as God's people would be demonstrated in part by what they ate every day and at every meal.

So assuming this makes sense, I think a follow up question is this. Why did God choose these things as either clean or unclean? What's God's rationale for what's in the clean list and what's in the unclean list? What make some things "detestable" according to verse 3, and some things not? Well, I wish I had a certain answer for you. The Bible doesn't explicitly tell us why some animals were clean and some were unclean. At points, it seems almost arbitrary, which as I mentioned causes us to think even of that first forbidden tree. And yet there is some evidence in Scripture that suggests God did have some rationale for selecting which animals he did as clean or unclean. Theologians have discussed this and come up with several different possibilities from the data we have in Scripture. Two ideas seem especially to have some merit in them, and I think are helpful to think about. And as I share these two possible reasons of how God might have made his selections, realize that I don't

think it's an either/or. I think it's possible that both of these ideas influenced God's selection of some or all of these animals.

So the first possible reason for why God might have selected some animals to be clean or unclean is about hygiene. Some have suggested that for hygienic reasons, either real or apparent, God selected some animals to be clean and some to be unclean. The idea is that the unclean animals may be less healthy or hygienic for you to eat, or pose possible greater health risks, and therefore God told them to avoid them. Of course, you can certainly see that with some of the animals. Like in the list of unclean birds in verse 12, these seem to be largely scavenger birds. Those sorts of birds might call into question how hygienic it would be to catch and eat them. At least one pharmacological study (Dr. David Macht of John Hopkins in 1953) has been done on these clean and unclean animals that had some results that suggested that unclean animals had greater toxicity levels than the clean ones.

In other words, there may be something to be said that there was some real hygienic value back then in staying away from these unclean animals. God in his wisdom certainly would know what's best for them, and that may have been his rationale. And yet even if there wasn't a real hygienic value for them, if there was only a perceived or apparent hygienic value for them, that itself might be part of the rationale. In that case, it wouldn't be that God was mistaken about the hygiene. But remember, God's trying to teach them and the world an important truth. They were his holy people and were called to live in purity and cleanness. If the world thought these unclean animals were detestable in terms of their hygiene, that alone might be sufficient reason for God to forbid them to eat these things. By not eating them for either real or apparent hygienic reasons, would show forth who they were called to be: the holy people of God living in purity.

Let me suggest a contemporary example here. This is a loose example, but I hope it's helpful. If you get invited to have dinner with the President at the White House, you probably won't be served McDonalds. Now I don't say that strictly for hygienic reasons, but certainly the status of the President, and you as his distinguished guest, would suggest that you have a meal of a finer quality and higher standard, and hopefully healthier too.

The second possible reason for why God might have selected some animals to be clean or unclean is this: that these animals were connected with pagan worship and rituals. You know, the hygiene category I just mentioned doesn't seem to fit all the examples of clean and unclean animals. What's unhygienic about cooking a young goat in its mother milk, which is forbidden in verse 21? Well, nothing that I'm aware of. But we do have evidence that suggests this was a pagan ritual done back then. Pigs were used in a lot of pagan cults too; which may be part of the rationale on their restriction too. Certainly in verse 1 that's the case as well. Verse 1 is not talking about eating, but about not mourning for the dead like pagans do, with shaving your head and cutting yourself.

And so this category certainly wouldn't seem to cover all the different animal selections either. But you could see why it would influence at least some of the selections. God, as a holy God, would not want his holy people to eat in ways that at all resemble the practices of pagan religions. Their use in cultic worship of false religions adds something detestable to them. They no longer would be fitting for the holy clean people of God to consume. Instead their eating would resemble their special status.

Here's another contemporary example. Assume you have dinner with the board of directors of the Heinz Corporation. If they served something that involved ketchup, you wouldn't expect to be served Hunt's ketchup. No, that would be like traitorous for them to do that. They'd serve Heinz ketchup. Nothing wrong with Hunt's ketchup inherently; it's edible; but the Heinz people surely wouldn't serve you something that belongs to the competitor. That just wouldn't be fitting for their specific status and position.

And so I think we have to acknowledge some mystery here with regards to why God chose some animals and not others to be clean or unclean. Maybe it was more clear back then. But either way it required faith; and it required a separation. By faith, they had to live differently than the world, even in something as fundamental as their food. But, we can acknowledge some mystery here, while still recognizing the principle. For likely various reasons, God identified some things as clean foods and some as unclean. As the holy people of God, they lived with a higher standard than the world. Even their outward eating was to demonstrate purity, cleanness, and separation from the rest of the world.

And yet, ultimately these outward food laws pointed to an inward reality. We see that clearly when we get into the New Testament. But already in the Old Testament there's that perspective being developed. Like in Psalm 24. It talks about the requirements for coming up to the temple. The first instinct would be to think about ceremonial cleanness. But it describes the person coming to the temple in Psalm 24:4 as "He who has clean hands and a pure heart." This uses the language of cleanness, but really is talking about something internal. That's clear with the language of a pure heart. But even the idea of clean hands in that Psalm isn't really talking about physically washed hands, but ones that are innocent of wrongdoing. Do you see how that Psalm uses the language of outward cleanness and applies it to an inward reality?

Zechariah 13:1 takes this idea of cleanness and uses it to look forward to the work of Jesus. It says, "On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness. That verse from Zechariah says there is something the Messiah, Jesus, would do, to solve the problem of sin and uncleanness. Well, isn't that what Jesus did? But Jesus showed that the problem with cleanness wasn't something outward. It was something inward.

Of course Jesus tells us that in the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," Matthew 5:8. Pure in heart. You could also translate that clean in heart. Jesus does what the Old Testament had started to do. To take the language of ceremonial cleanness and apply it to something inward. He says we need to be concerned with inward purity. Jesus addressed the food issue in the classic verse on this subject in Mark 7. Mark 7:15, "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 7:19, "Because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated." Jesus' words tell us the lesson that the Old Testament was trying to teach. The people needed inward cleanness. Their eating of only clean animals was a type and a shadow of what they really needed. At best, their eating of clean animals only reflected what God would do on their insides. And the New Testament tells us that ultimately this is something Jesus does. He cleans where no one else can clean.

A great passage that brings this all together is Acts 10. There Peter sees this vision of a bunch of different unclean animals. And in the vision he is commanded to rise, kill, and eat. To eat these unclean animals. Peter objects, but he's then told this: "What God has made clean, do not call common." Now this is interesting on two levels. On one level, it says that these food laws are no longer binding on Christians. But that's really just a surface level understanding of this vision. The point of the vision was actually to tell Peter that Gentiles were going to receive the gospel. They were going to believe in Jesus. The end result would be that these Gentiles who would have been previously been considered unclean, would now be seen as clean. And this transformation was to come about as the Gentiles placed their faith in Jesus. God was telling this vision to Peter so that he would recognize these Gentiles as brothers in the Lord. Peter then gave these new converts the sign of water baptism. Baptism of course symbolizes outward cleansing as well, but it ultimately is to reflect the inward cleansing that Christ gives us. We are cleansed from our sin, and are made holy in Christ. God has made us clean in Christ.

And so this is amazing. These food laws in the old covenant served a provisional purpose. They outwardly stood for what we inwardly needed. They ultimately looked forward to the cleansing that would come in Jesus. When that cleansing came, these provisional rules were no longer necessary. Thus, why we are free to eat any of these animals now under the new covenant. Their typological nature has served its purpose.

And yet, even though that's the case, we recognize that's there still something provisional to our cleansing as Christians. We already have been made pure and clean on the inside. 1 Corinthians 6:11 says that we have *already* been washed in the name of Jesus. And yet we know we still have struggles with sin. Our actions don't always resemble that of a clean heart. This is the *already, not yet*, dynamic of our Christian life. We look forward to that day when our cleansing will be perfected in heaven.

And so it's fitting the provisional nature of our cleansing is captured by the sacraments. Think about that. We have the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are kinda like the ceremonial laws in the Old Covenant. They are outward signs looking for an inward reality. There's nothing special about the water of baptism in itself. There's nothing special about the bread and wine in the Supper in themselves. But the water of baptism that washes us externally, looks to our need for Christ to wash our insides. And the bread and wine shows not only that we need to be fed by God, but that we as God's holy people have been invited to the table of the Lord, to eat with him. And the sacraments function much like how the food laws in the old covenant did. The food laws marked out God's people as set apart from the rest of the world. Likewise the sacraments are not given to everyone. They are reserved only for the people of God. They mark us out now as people holy unto the Lord; as his chosen and treasured people who he has cleansed. And as we faithfully administer these sacraments, we understand the provisional nature of our cleansing. These outward signs remind us that God is at work inside us. That's a work that will be finished when Christ returns.

Saints of God, I hope you've been reminded of our need for real inward cleansing today, and that you've been reminded of the gospel; that this comes through faith in Jesus Christ. And so I urge us all then to live as God's holy people. If in the old covenant people showed their holy status by what they did and didn't eat, how can we under the new covenant show forth our spiritual status in Christ?

Well, certainly let's as a starting point take advantage of all the blessings of the sacraments. These very things are given by God to declare to the world that we are holy. That we are clean. These things set us apart visibly from the world. In that regard they function somewhat similarly as the old covenant food laws. Let's take great pride in the sacraments, boasting in the Lord through these blessings. For ultimately they are not about what they outwardly represent. As 1 Peter 3:21 says, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

And so with the light of Christ, let us then live out the purity that Christ has won for us. If the holiness in the old covenant demanded the people live physically clean by what they ate, how much more are we called to live spiritually clean by all that we do! 2 Corinthians 6:6 says that we are to commend ourselves to the world in purity.

Let us live and act as those who have been spiritually cleansed and made holy in Christ. Do what is spiritually "hygienic" for you; for your own spiritual good and growth in Christ. All things may be permissible, Paul says, but not everything is beneficial. Let's live and act in keeping with our pure status.

In the same way, don't act in your spiritual lives like the pagans; hold yourself out as distinct from the world's false religions and practices. We do this every time we come to church; we do it every time we participate in the sacraments. But think about the frequency of eating. In the old covenant even their eating throughout every day reflected their status. May we strive to find the same spiritual equivalent today. Making everything we say, do, and think, throughout the day, be an expression that we are holy unto the Lord, and cleansed by Jesus.

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