Leviticus 11 - Food for Thought

With the Sacrificial system now in place (1-7) and the priests to oversee and administer it (8-10), they now have to carry out their duties. One of their key duties is to ‘distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean’ (Lev 10:10).

It’s easy to be overwhelmed by the complexity and seeming irrelevance of what we read in these chapters of Leviticus. Because while we might be able to understand the need for sacrifice, the strange distinctions between fish, animals and insects is just too far removed from our lives today.

During the preparation and discussion in this study, we’re going to try and untangle the riddle, and understand the reason for God introducing such laws. And we’ll do this mainly through Leviticus 11.

Personal Preparation Day 1 – What the problem is not

Our first task is to understand what the food laws were not meant to be for, as this will help us move forward and understand what they were meant to be for.

If you skim through Leviticus 11, you’ll see two categories coming up - clean and unclean. The laws from Leviticus 11-15 are divided in this way to let the Israelites know what things are clean, and what things cause uncleanness.

1. Looking at Leviticus 11, verses 10-12, 13, 20, 23 and 41. How are the Israelites supposed to react towards those things that are unclean?

2. From Genesis 1:24-25, how are animals described?

3. What restrictions does God place on mankind in Gen 1:29-30?

4. From Mark 7:17-19, what does Jesus say about clean and unclean?

So, Israel is supposed to ‘detest’ those things that are unclean. But it’s not because some parts of creation are unclean - God declared all of it to be good, and in fact gave it to mankind to eat as they saw fit. And it’s not to do with hygiene either - as Jesus declared food clean well before the invention of refrigeration, as one commentator has said. So what is the reason for these laws?

Personal Preparation Day 2 – The reason for the laws

Today we’re going to try to work out why God classified some things as clean and some unclean. Last time, we learnt that it was not related to the people being ‘bad’, nor was it about hygiene. It was to do with what these creatures represented.

1. From Leviticus 11:1-28, what happens when the Israelites come into contact with the things spoken about in this passage?

2. From Leviticus 13:46 and 15:31, what is the result of becoming unclean?
We've seen in chapters 1-7, that sacrifice is needed to make atonement whenever people come to God. And from the verses that we've just looked at, we can see that uncleanness leads to exclusion from the camp of God. But what does uncleanness actually represent?

3. Look at Leviticus 11:29-30 and 11:41-42. How does God describe these animals?

4. Can you think of anywhere else in the Old Testament that a creature is described as moving on its belly?¹

The consequences of eating unclean foods or coming in contact with something unclean was vivid and immediate within Israel. They were set outside of the camp for a period of time, or until restitution was made.

This was a stark warning to Israel - Be careful! Listen to God's Laws! One animal may look the same as another (just as the fruit in the garden of Eden did), but God has set the boundaries and you need to listen to His Word. Failing to do so will set you outside the presence of God. Remember Eden. Be careful!

**Personal Preparation Day 3 – The purpose behind the laws**

Israel was meant to be different – its people were to listen to God and obey his Word. But they were to be even more than that. They were to be like their God. They were to be Holy.

Read Leviticus 11:41-47

1. From these verses, what is God calling on Israel to be?

2. What reasons does he give?

3. According to Leviticus chapters 11-15, how was an Israelite supposed to express this?

Holiness for Israel was defined by God’s character and God’s actions. From the way Israelite society was set up, it was clearly visible who was Holy and who wasn’t. Those inside the camp were consecrated to God. Those outside were unclean & detestable.

When we reach the end of 2 Kings in the Old Testament, we see that Israel has in fact been banished from God’s presence. Because of their uncleanness, because of their unfaithfulness, and because of their failure to listen to and obey God’s voice. This is just like when Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, banished from God’s land.

While sacrifice is necessary, something more is also needed. Israel needs to change in order to want to do God’s will.

¹ Have a look at Gen 3:14. This is the only other place in the Old Testament where this word is used.
Group Discussion Questions

Hopefully from doing the preparation this week you’re feeling a little less overwhelmed by the food laws. In this study, we’ll be looking at Leviticus 11 and trying to work out what they were there for then, and what they mean to us now.

1. Are there Old Testament laws you know of that Christians conveniently ignore these days? What are the reasons they (or you!) give?

Read Leviticus 11:1-25

2. How was Israel supposed to view things that were ‘unclean’?

3. From Genesis 1:24-25, 29-30 and Mark 7:17-19, what can we say weren’t reasons for things being unclean?

4. As an Israelite, what was the result of being unclean? (See Leviticus 13:46 & 15:31)

5. In Genesis 3, we have a serpent who draws mankind away from God, and is cursed to crawl on its belly (3:14). What parallels can you draw from Leviticus 11:29-30 and 11:41-42?

6. How might this help us understand what the clean and unclean laws represent?

Read Leviticus 11:41-47

7. How do these verses tell us about what God is calling Israel to be? How does God’s character and actions influence this?

8. In what order is Israel’s Holiness and their redemption out of Egypt spoken in? Does it matter?

9. If someone was to ask you to explain the reason behind the clean and unclean laws for Israel, how would you respond?

God wants his people to be separate, consecrated, Holy. They weren’t like this when they were in Egypt. It’s that this shows that they were no longer under slavery to Pharaoh, but rather living in relationship with the true and living God. And this reminder and call was seen in adherence to God’s Word. But we live after Christ, so things look a little bit differently.

Read Romans 6:19-23

10. What redemptive act did Israel’s Exodus from Egypt foreshadow?

11. How does Paul view Christians and Holiness today?

12. If you’re a Christian, how radically different are your attitudes and behaviours now than when you were a “slave to sin”? Is that how you viewed your life before?
Appendix A - The Tent of Meeting

The arrangement of the 12 tribes of Israel when camped.

Asher  Dan  Napthali
Levites

Benjamin  Ephraim  Manasseh
Levites

Tent of Meeting (As above)
Levites

Gad  Reuben  Simeon

Priests
Issachar  Judah  Zebulon
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Sacrifice</th>
<th>Types of Animals</th>
<th>Hand-laying?</th>
<th>How is the blood used?</th>
<th>Who gets to eat?</th>
<th>Purpose of Sacrifice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burnt (Lev 1)</td>
<td>Cattle, sheep, goats, birds.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Poured on altar sides</td>
<td>No-one</td>
<td>Makes atonement. (1:4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grain / Cereal (Lev 2)</td>
<td>Grain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Priests</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellowship/Peace (Lev 3)</td>
<td>Cattle, Sheep, Goats</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Poured on altar sides</td>
<td>Priest &amp; People</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin (Lev 4:1-5:13)</td>
<td>Cattle, sheep, goats, birds</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Smeared on altars, sprinkled inside tent</td>
<td>Priests</td>
<td>To secure forgiveness for intentional / unintentional sins. (4:26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt (Lev 5:14-6:7)</td>
<td>Rams</td>
<td>Probably</td>
<td>Poured on altar sides</td>
<td>Priests</td>
<td>To secure forgiveness for intentional / unintentional sins. (5:16, 19; 6:7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>