

March 9 – Tough Questions
Why Did God Give All Those Clean/Unclean laws?

Tim Perry here, pastor of Spiritual Discovery – coming at you with Week 10 of Tough Questions.

This week, we're going to look at the issue of clean vs. unclean. Why was it that the Israelites couldn't eat a gecko, but they could eat a goat? They could eat a sheep. What's up with that? Why is it that if somebody had an infectious skin disease, they were unclean and had to live outside the camp until they were better?

Well, a class that I took in seminary, was from a guy named Lawson Younger and Dr. Younger showed us a chart that helped me understand clean and unclean. I bet you'll find it helpful, too. He says the way that we need to look at clean and unclean, needs to be geographical in nature. So think of the way the Israelites were actually living at that time. They lived in an encampment surrounding the tabernacle. So if you took an outside in approach, there would be the wilderness that they were wandering through until they got to the Promised Land. Anytime God told them to stop, they were to build a camp that surrounded the tabernacle. So you had the wilderness area, you had the area outside the camp surrounding it – just immediately outside of where people's tents were and where families lived – then you had inside the camp where the day in and the day out life of the Israelite community happened. Then inside of that is the tabernacle, and the tabernacle itself has a kind of outside/inside structure to it. You had an outer wall, you had a building inside of that outer wall and inside of that building you had the Holy of Holies where God himself dwelled.

So if we looked at our chart then, the way God had the Israelites lived – reflected this geography of far from God – to God himself and near God. So what we have is a situation where God steps in and says, "I want to be sure that you are able to live with me. So I want you to do it on my terms." That's where God gives the Israelites the Law. In the Law, their day in and day out life gets spelled out for them. There were certain patterns God wanted them to live by. As long as they lived according to these patterns and followed the prescripts that God had given them in the Law, then they stayed inside of the camp, they remained clean and they remained able to come over and draw near to the temple at certain times of the year in order to worship the Lord. But God had created this category of unclean in order to alert people to the fact that He is holy.

So when we look at it on a moral scale – way over here would be things that were forbidden. This would be the zone of forbidden sin. Any known sin that God could prescribe for people – was to be avoided – it was to be taboo. So things that were taboo were over here. You weren't to trespass against the law and if you did, it was like you were pushing yourself away from God. You were making yourself unclean.

Then you had the category of clean and unclean. Some things in the clean and unclean category have nothing to do with moral choices. They really don't have as much to do with sin as you would think when you read them.

The last category, which is pretty important to outline is this one over here between things that were holy and things that were not. So everything on this side of this dividing line is so closely associated with God that we have to refer to it as holy – and things on the other side we just refer to those as common. Or another word that was used is profane. Now that doesn't seem like an appropriate word to you or I, but profane just simply means “not holy” or “unholy”. Not everything that is not holy is necessarily sin or morally wrong in a drastic way. So God creates in here a sort of buffer zone in which he wants his people to live. Now part of the rationale has to do for preserving the peace between God and people in this arrangement. You will remember the Israelites when Moses went up on the mountain, they wanted to go with him because they wanted to see God – they wanted to come to God. And it wasn't a good idea. God said “no” – keep them back. I only want you to come up and get the law. It was because God was serious about His own holiness and He was realistic about people's sin. So when we read those laws and commandments talking about clean and unclean, we need to see them as an attempt on God's part to create a buffer zone of safety really – in which we could live our lives out and draw close to God.

Now one really profound thing that happens in the New Testament in Mark Chapter 5, is that there is a woman who is ceremonially unclean all of the time because she has what we know today is called endometriosis. She has an uncontrolled issue of blood. She's ceremonial unclean. She would always have to live outside the camp. Not completely in the wilderness far from God – not associated with sin necessarily – but ceremonially unclean. You see that when Jesus comes, he is the ultimate fulfillment of this whole system of people wanting to live with their God and be near God. You remember the story maybe – and if not, I'll just tell it to you. Jesus comes along one day and he's in a crowd of people, and he realizes that someone has approached him and has actually touched him. This woman, it says, had incredible faith in Jesus. She knew if she could just touch his clothing, that she would be healed. And on our paradigm – what that means here is that she is someone who not only comes to where Jesus is at – but Jesus is no longer confined in here – God is no longer confined in a temple or a tabernacle or in an Arc of a Covenant, he's out and able to walk around where people are at – making himself accessible to people in a way that the system of the law attempted to do, but could never do. And when he encounters this woman who is unclean, we find out that the contamination of Jesus' holiness actually works backwards. You see ordinarily unclean things – if you touch them – they would transfer their uncleanness to you. But this is the unique thing about Jesus. In his holiness – in being one with God – being God himself – he is able to bring all of his glory and his attributes – everywhere he goes. So this God of the New Testament who comes is actually making his holiness accessible to people. It's a profound change in God strategy for how to live among his people - how to give his grace and goodness away.

Well, if you find this idea helpful – why don't you send me a comment or two. I'd love to interact with it. I think that this creates an interesting perspective through which to look at the question of clean and unclean. It helps us take away the stigma, let's say, of unclean always automatically being associated with something that's taboo or sinful or forbidden. Think of it as a safety zone of life patterns in which God calls his people to live so that he can help them become holy like He is holy. But in the process, he can give them his grace and his goodness.

So thanks for being with me. If you've got a thought or two, leave it on the "comment" down below and we'll see you next week for *Tough Questions*.