

Lesson 16: Leviticus 11-15 Ceremonial Purity

Introduction

Leviticus: Kingdom Requirements						
Key Passage: 19:2						
1-7 Ritual	8-10 Priesthood	11-15 Purity	16-17 Atonement	18-20 Purity	21-22 Priesthood	23-27 Ritual
Sacrifices	Consecration	Ceremonial cleanliness	Substitution	Moral cleanliness	Standards	Festivals, etc...

We are in the third frame of our chiasmic structure of Leviticus. The first outer frame at the beginning and end of the book addresses worship rituals. The second frame on either end of the book addresses the priesthood and the third frame addresses purity laws. Instead of looking at both purity sections together, we are going to take them one at a time, so we will consider chapters 11-15 in this lesson and then chapters 18-20 in the next lesson.

Chapters 11-15 gives us laws of ceremonial purity or ceremonial cleanliness. These laws are symbolic. I will start by grouping the different laws into categories. Then we will consider the meaning and function of these laws. And then we will consider the question, "What here applies to us as New Covenant believers?"

How do we organize the ceremonial purity laws in Leviticus 11-15?

The text separates into four categories: cleanliness and animals in chapter 11, cleanliness and birth in chapter 12, cleanliness and leprosy in chapters 13-14, and cleanliness and bodily fluids in chapter 15.

1. Cleanliness and animals. (11)

We start with the most well-known cleanliness laws about which animals may or may not be eaten. Jews today call these kosher laws. Kosher comes from a Hebrew word meaning suitable or pure.

The text starts with a formula in 11:1-2 that we are going to see repeat, "The LORD spoke again to Moses and to Aaron, saying to them, 'Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'These are the creatures which you may eat from all the animals that are on the earth.'" This section is then wrapped up at the end of the chapter with a summary this way, this is verses 46-47,

⁴⁶This is the law regarding the animal and the bird, and every living thing that moves in the waters and everything that swarms on the earth, ⁴⁷ to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean, and between the edible creature and the creature which is not to be eaten.

So, we have animal, bird, everything that moves in the waters, and then everything that swarms on the earth and that includes rodents, reptiles, bugs, so the list here is fairly comprehensive, but once again, what seems like a lot of detail to us when we get into it and start reading through it, is not that much detail if you are actually trying to put it into practice. We have another 20 verses in Deuteronomy 14 about clean and unclean animals, but that code is mostly restating this code, so adds very little additional information. We pretty much just have these two similar chapters in all the Torah on the food laws.

Jewish Kosher laws have expanded a great deal on these. For example, orthodox Jews will not put meat and dairy on the table at the same time. Meat must be separated from dairy. No cheeseburgers. And we have to ask, where does that come from? I don't remember any comments about dairy in any of the verses. The Jewish argument quotes Deuteronomy 14:12, "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk." But there is a really big leap from not boiling a lamb in its mother's milk to not eating cheese on a hamburger. Are we really supposed to take this one odd, half of a verse as creating this whole category of no meat, no dairy on the table at the same time? I do not think that was the intention of Moses at all. I would argue that Jewish kosher laws go way beyond Moses.

So, these things are clear from Moses, no pork, no shrimp, no vultures, no rats, no spiders. But lamb, trout, chicken, locust that's all good. Also, cookware that touches the unclean must be washed or thrown out. And animals found dead are all unclean, so, no roadkill allowed.

2. Cleanliness and birth. (12)

We get the introductory formula again in Chapter 12:1, "Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ...'" and that introduces the second set of cleanliness requirements concerning birth. After birth the mother is considered unclean. We have to ask, "What's up with that?" The text goes on to say that her period of uncleanness is longer if she gives birth to a girl than if she gives birth to a boy. So, how do we read that? That does not sound right.

I do not think this text was meant to demean or devalue motherhood or baby girls. I believe that is the wrong way to read the requirements. Though it is certainly one of those texts that unsettles us. I am going to address the uncleanness of birth when I talk about the meaning of these laws. I do not want to give an easy or pat answer to the difference in the text between birth to a boy and birth to a girl. So, please forgive me, but I am going to reserve that question for when we get to the book of Numbers. I'll take the opportunity then to look at several passages from different books in the Pentateuch that might be taken to devalue women and then I will suggest a different perspective that I believe fits better with the text, the cultural situation, and the biblical principle of equal worth for men and women. It will be more beneficial to wait and address several of these difficult passages together at the same time.

3. Cleanliness and leprosy. (13-14)

Chapters 13-14 cover cleanliness and leprosy. The introductory formula "Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying..." occurs three times in these two chapters at the beginning in 13:1, but then also in 14:1, and 14:33. So, we could subdivide the requirements into leprosy of the skin, mildew in leather, and mildew in the walls of buildings. The Hebrews used the term leprosy to group all these all together. That's what we see in the summary at the end of the section in 14:54-57,

⁵⁴ This is the law for any mark of leprosy—even for a scale, ⁵⁵ and for the leprous garment or house, ⁵⁶ and for a swelling, and for a scab, and for a bright spot— ⁵⁷ to teach when they are unclean and when they are clean. This is the law of leprosy.

The law of leprosy, then, is a broad category of any kind of infection or growth, whether in people, in leather or cloth, or in buildings. Most of the text does give attention to identifying infectious disease in people and to providing rules for purification if and when the infection passes. Considering skin disease, the term leprosy here is a broad class of skin problems, not to be specifically associated with the disease we think of when we here the term leprosy. That would be the worse case scenario that is mentioned here.

5. Cleanliness and bodily fluids. (15)

The final category, cleanliness of bodily fluids, also begins with the introductory formula in 15:1-2, "The LORD also spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel, and say to them, ...'" The section is summed up in this way at the end in 15:32-33,

³² This is the law for the one with a discharge, and for the man who has a seminal emission so that he is unclean by it, ³³ and for the woman who is ill because of menstrual impurity, and for the one who has a discharge, whether a male or a female, or a man who lies with an unclean woman.

These laws are evenly distributed between men and women. That last phrase, "a man who lies with an unclean woman" does not refer to a bad woman but refers to a man sleeping with a woman during her menstrual cycle. The woman is not morally or spiritually unclean. She is ceremonial unclean during her period.

What is the function and meaning of the ceremonial purity laws in Leviticus 11-15?

The Meaning

The primary meaning of the cleanliness laws is symbolic holiness of the Israelites as a recognition of the real holiness of God. In the chapter on animals, 11:44-45 states, "I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the earth."⁴⁵ For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy." That is the main idea. The main idea is that the Israelites would see themselves as set apart and holy because God truly is holy.

Uncleanliness will also be connected to the sins of idolatry and immorality in the next, parallel section, and throughout the Old Testament. But the behaviors or conditions in this chapter are not sin or states of sin. Here we are concerned with ceremonial uncleanliness. Just thinking about the animals, are the animals sinful or somehow evil that are declared unclean. Well, no. God declared all animals good in Genesis 1 at the completed of creation. Jesus said this regarding food in Matthew 15:11 and 17-19.

¹¹ "It is not what enters into the mouth *that* defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man...¹⁷ Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated?¹⁸ But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man.¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders."

Peter was instructed to eat freely of any animal and to enter into a Gentile home where non-kosher food would be served. This is the word he received in Acts 10:15, "What God has cleansed no longer consider unholy." Paul reaffirms this statement, declaring in Romans 14:14, "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself..." The language of holy, clean, and unclean used here in Acts and Romans points us right back to this code we are looking at in Leviticus. And so, we take away this principle: if the food laws can be lifted in the New Covenant, then the eating of unclean animals was never a sin in and of itself in the first place. Eating unclean animals was only sinful during the time when God commanded that those animals not be eaten. So, if I told my little girl not to eat any jelly beans, that would not mean that jelly beans were necessarily evil. It is not a sin to eat a jelly bean. But it would be a sin for her to disobey her father and eat the jelly bean. So, at any point, I could lift the ban on jelly beans. Eating unclean meat was sinful because God commanded not to do it, not because of the inherent sinfulness of particular animals.

So, the idea of being unclean here is ceremonial. That is true of pork, it is true of a man with an infectious skin disease, it is true of a woman who has just given birth or the woman who is in her menstrual period. None of that is sinful in and of itself. It is symbolically unclean. And cleansing comes simply through washing, waiting an appropriate amount of time, and perhaps through sacrifice.

The foundational meaning of the cleanliness laws is a symbolic acknowledgement of the holiness of God. Let's consider now the function of these laws. Some of them seem to have different intents. What possible effects were intended?

The Function

1. The first function of the ceremonial purity code is to employ fundamental areas of life to provide regular reminders to the Israelites that God is holy and that human life is truly experienced by bringing daily behaviors in line with the truth of who God is. We order our behavior according to who our God is. Whether we are seeking moral purity or whether we are seeking ceremonial purity, the code reminds us that we align our life with God because God is holy.

2. So, first we have a focus on the holiness of God. But then also we have a reminder of our human sinfulness and frailty. Many of the unclean animals lived as carrions, feeding on dead flesh. There is an analogy there for sin. Leprosy proves an even better analogy, especially in its most extreme form. The leper loses sensation in the nervous system and becomes unaffected by cuts or burns or other wounds. In effect, he doesn't know how badly his actions are hurting him. He can't feel it. He can't sense that he is doing something damaging to himself. When we live separated off from the ways of God, our desires are twisted, and sometimes that works out okay because our desires are in line with what is good, but often our desires are in line with what is harmful and what is destructive. Sin is a spiritual leprosy. We do not have a sense that our behaviors are damaging our hearts, our minds, and our relationships. And so, we continue to do things without a recognition of what we are doing. And those wounds increase, and they grow, and the infection spreads. So, the ceremonial code uses the symbolism of life and death to remind us of our sinfulness and of our dependence on God.

3. So, along with symbolically emphasizing the holiness of God and the uncleanness of our sin, the ceremonial purity code also created a barrier between the Israelites and other peoples. Considering the ritual of the tabernacle and the requirements of the priesthood, we saw already how God established a symbolic barrier inside of Israel between the average Israelite and the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. The food laws and other ceremonial practices create barriers with people outside of Israel. The Israelites are supposed to interact with non-Israelites. They cannot be a kingdom of priests if they do not interact with those who need to believe. But for foreigners to enter into full fellowship with the Israelites, they have to be willing to place themselves under the covenant law of God. The modern cultures of Egypt and Canaan would exert significant pressure of the Israelites to conform. The purity code established a barrier between Israelites and non-Israelites society to help the Israelites resist being affected by ungodly culture and conforming to the thoughts and behaviors of that culture.

There was a powerful practical benefit to these laws. For centuries, Jews maintained their cultural identity even living as exiles without a homeland of Israel, surrounded by other cultures in which they lived. Their laws forbade marriage with outsiders and limited the influence of outside culture in their communities. They could not fellowship easily with Gentiles or with non-Israelites. I do not think that Christians are called to separate off from surrounding culture. We are not given these cultural barriers. I do think that Christians often underestimate the power of culture to mold thought, values, behaviors, especially among our youth. Are we aware of how much we are being molded by the culture around us? And what are we doing? We do not have the law establishing barriers for us. What steps are we taking to resist being conformed and just kind of going with the flow of culture around us?

I would suggest these three functions are the primary functions of the ceremonial purity code, to highlight the holiness of God, to remind us of the corruption of sin, and to create a partial barrier between Israelites and non-Israelites. Here are two more functions, I see in the ceremonial code.

4. The ceremonial purity code forbade pagan ritualistic practices. This is an important function we tend to miss because the practices the codes forbid are not things we experience in our cultures, so we miss that that is what is going on here. Recognizing this function helps us to understand some of the more obscure or confusing laws that rise up. We read it, and we have no idea what it is about, but blood and bodily fluids, especially those relating to sexuality, were used in idolatrous and magical ceremonies, such as in fertility rites to move the gods to bless the crops or bless people with children. So, by declaring blood and bodily fluids unclean, God eliminates any such practices from his tabernacle. Menstrual blood, semen, birth tissue, any other kind of blood or fluid, which may have been used in pagan rites was automatically excluded. And it seems odd to us, but it was an important point to establish in the Ancient Near East.

That pagan rites are being forbidden becomes evident when Moses addresses clean and unclean animals in Deuteronomy 14. That section on food laws begins and ends with two very odd commands. It starts this way with 14:1-2,

¹ “You are the sons of the LORD your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave your forehead for the sake of the dead. ² “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

So, that is odd. And then it ends in verse 21 with the seemingly out of place command, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” And in between are all the laws about clean and unclean animals. The logical connection that tends to elude modern readers is that both verses, at the beginning about cutting and at the end about boiling milk have to do with pagan ritual. So, the cutting or shaving of the head in verse 1 was a pagan practice. Cutting was used by the prophets of Baal, for example. That is mentioned in the story about Elijah. They are symbolically re-enacting the death of Baal by cutting themselves in order to move him to act. And boiling a baby goat in its mother’s milk has nothing to do with meat and dairy and whether or not we can eat a cheeseburger. It is probably a fertility rite that was enacted. It is sort of magic or it is sort of to move the god to give you favor to help your crops grow or to help you have babies. So, the food laws in Deuteronomy are given in this context with a law at either end that rejects pagan worship rites practiced in the cultures around Israel.

So, making sure that the Israelites did not practice these pagan rituals was one of the functions of the ceremonial purity rites. Another example that targeted pagan ritual is the prohibition against tattoos in Leviticus 19:28, “You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the LORD.” So, the first command in that verse is definitely against a pagan spiritual practice of cutting the body for the sake of the dead. Presumably, that is also why tattoos are mentioned here. The prohibition is against tattoos in general for Israelites, but the idea behind that is not that themselves are bad. The idea behind that is that tattoos are used in these cultures to elicit the favor of the gods. It is a pagan rite. That is what is wrong with the tattoos. It is paganism or magic.

5. I want to mention one last function of the ceremonial purity code. I do not think the Bible directly affirms this, though it seems to me rather self-evident. A secondary function of the purity code seems to have been to promote the health of the Israelites, both in regards to nutrition and hygiene. This function is not agreed on by biblical scholars. Here is a quote from John Calvin opposing the idea. He says this,

Those who imagine that God here had regard to their health, as if discharging the office of a Physician, pervert by their vain speculation the whole force and utility of this law. I allow, indeed, that the meats which God permits to be eaten are wholesome, and best adapted for food; but, both from the preface,—in which God admonished them that holiness was to be cultivated by the people whom He had chosen,—as also from the (subsequent) abolition of this law, it is sufficiently plain that this distinction of meats was a part of that elementary instruction under which God kept His ancient people. “Let no man therefore judge you (says Paul) in meat or in drink, which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ”¹

I think the resistance comes from scholars, like Calvin and later scholars, who see the purity laws as a means to uphold the holiness of God and the holiness of the Israelites and to create the separation with other peoples. And I agree with that. I think that is the primary function of the holiness laws. That is what we are taught by Scripture. So, I do not want to suggest that the whole purpose of the laws is health and nutrition. So, that’s what Calvin is saying, that if we suggest somehow that God is a physician then we are perverting by “vain speculation the whole force and utility of this law.” I think it is quite possible for the laws to have a secondary function. And I am quite ready to say that the

¹ Rooker, M. F. (2000). *Leviticus* (Vol. 3A, p. 172). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

nutrition and hygiene were benefits of the ceremonial law. And I assume God intended those benefits as a way to provide for and protect the Israelites. The Bible does not say, “Do these things so that you will be healthy.” Still, it appears obvious to me that the code does commands healthy behaviors. And that God had that in mind.

Scavenging animals that eat trash and dead flesh are forbidden. Pigs were used to control trash in Philadelphia waste dumps into the late 1800s because pigs will eat anything. Shrimp are filters of the sea. Crabs eat up dead stuff in seconds, and vultures swoop down. Toxins build up in the flesh of carrion eaters like this, things that feed off the dead. And God’s protecting hand seems to be at play here in not allowing his people to eat these things, especially at a time when there is no refrigeration. It is probably good they were not eating pork. You would at least lower your bad cholesterol if you ate kosher.

For women going through menstruation or having recently experienced birth, we can imagine how uncomfortable that could have been in the Ancient Near East without any modern feminine hygiene products. The idea of being unclean during this time was symbolic. They were not really considered sinful or wicked for giving birth or having a period. That symbolic uncleanliness then had the result of requiring them not to attend gatherings of the community for worship. They had enforced permission to skip worship gatherings just after giving birth and during their period. And I understand that not all woman would like that. But I bet some would appreciate it very much.

The laws regarding skin disease directly affect health. If the disease is a spreading disease, the law here requires that the sick person is quarantined. And if the skin disease achieves a certain level of seriousness, the person may have to live outside of the camp. And certainly, that is a hard reality. Yet, with the level of medical knowledge available, it was also a very wise requirement for the protection of the whole community. And the same idea seems to apply to mildew in clothing or in the homes. The health of the family and the community was in question, and these ceremonial purity laws provided a protection to prevent the spread of contamination.

So, the ceremonial purity laws promote a cleanliness and a healthiness in life and also in religious ceremony that was unparalleled in the Ancient Near East.

What Mosaic laws apply to us as New Covenant believers?

We have described the purity laws and considered the meaning and function of those laws. Now here is a very real question we need to ask ourselves as New Covenant believers. Do any of the commands in Leviticus apply to us at all? I assume you are not trying to keep these laws, that you do not sacrifice in your church and that you do not keep the Jewish festivals, that you eat pork and shrimp, that you do not connect bodily fluids with staying away from church, that you do not check with your pastor about mildew in your home. We simply do not think about ever applying any of these commands even though they are clear commands of God.

Some of us pretend to keep the Sabbath but not really. The Sabbath is Saturday, so if you are keeping it on Sunday you are automatically not keeping the Levitical code. And we probably don’t even know what the real biblical rules are for what it means to keep the Sabbath. We know that we ought not go to our job, but probably a lot of the work we would do on the Sabbath would fall under the category of work in the Bible. If you eat a nice meal as a family, someone’s doing the work to prepare it. So, even if we claim to keep Sabbath, we are really not trying to keep it according to the Levitical code.

But the question of what might apply is going to get even harder in our next lesson when we move from the ceremonial purity laws, which we really do not feel like we need to apply anyway, to the moral purity laws in 18-20. These we are ready to ignore, but those chapters are going to address idolatry, sexuality, homosexuality, loving your neighbor, other laws that we feel like we ought to observe. It gets even harder when we add in the 10 Commandments. Do these laws apply to us? And if we say, “Yes” to those laws, to the moral laws, but “No” to the food laws, what is our justification? Are we just picking and choosing the ones that we want to do, what is right to us? That is the attack

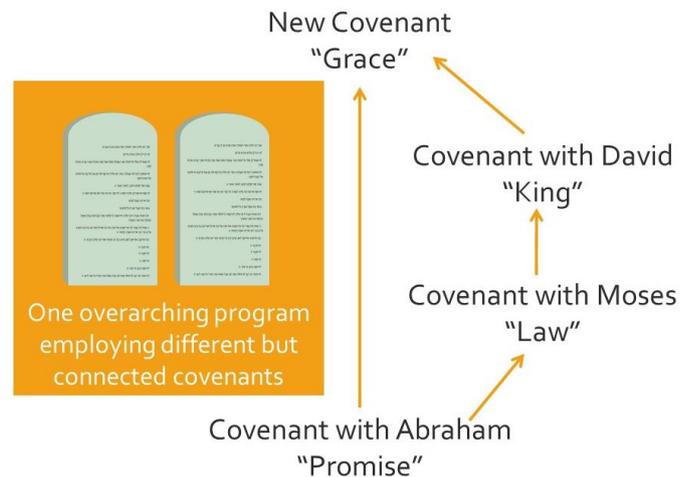
you will get from the sceptic, that “You all are just picking and choosing.” “Yeah, you say that homosexuality is wrong but then you do not obey the majority of these laws that are in Leviticus. So, which is it? You are just doing what you want.”

And that might be true. Maybe we do not really know. But that does not have to be the case. We can know whether or not the laws apply to us who live under the New Covenant. The answer to this question comes from our understanding of covenant in the Bible.

My Old Testament professor Jeffrey Niehaus taught a way of understanding the relationship of biblical covenant that I find very helpful. I believe it is an accurate biblical perspective. I introduced his line of thinking back in Genesis when I taught that there are six covenant mediator prophets in Scripture. Six prophets who brought new covenant or mediated new covenant. And I got this from lectures under Dr. Niehaus, but the material is also available in his book *Biblical Theology, Volume 1, The Common Grace Covenants*.²

The first two covenants in Scripture were made with all of humankind, being mediated first through Adam and then through Noah. Niehaus calls these the covenants of creation and re-creation. They are common grace covenants, meaning that they are covenants for all people. And these covenants still stand. All people are under the authority of the great king whether they submit to that authority or not. God is not God of the Jews only nor of Christians only. Yahweh is Lord of lords and King of kings, God of all peoples.

In addition to these common grace covenants, God’s plan of salvation for all humankind involved entering into special grace covenant with specific groups of people. And there are four special grace covenants in Scripture with four covenant mediators, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. And to borrow language from Paul in Romans, we can also call these covenants the covenant of promise, the covenant of law, the covenant of kingship, and the covenant of grace.



Niehaus describes God’s plan of salvation as “one overarching program employing different but connected covenants.” So, then it is up to us as we study Scripture to try to understand, what are the connections between the covenants? Where is there continuity and where is there discontinuity.

The covenant with Abraham is the foundational promise upon which is built the covenant with Moses and the covenant with David. The New Covenant also stands on the foundation of the promise to Abraham and is the fulfillment of the Mosaic and Davidic covenants. I have a nice chart for that in the notes, if you want to go to observetheword.com and check that out.

Here are two key ideas regarding covenant. First, covenant is a formal agreement between God and a particular people. That is what covenant is, an agreement with God and a people. Second, the stipulations of the covenant apply to those for whom the covenant applies. The people of the covenant are supposed to live under the stipulations. The covenant with David, for example, only applies to the sons of David, that his line would rule forever. You are not of the line of David. It is not your covenant. You might benefit from that covenant, but the covenant itself does not apply to you. It is not with you.

I have also found it helpful to add to Dr. Niehaus’ presentation of covenant the recognition that every covenant with God elicits two basic questions. The first question we must ask regarding

² Jeffrey J. Niehaus. *Biblical Theology, Volume 1, The Common Grace Covenants*. (Wooster, Ohio: Weaver Book Company, 2014) 34.

covenant with God is this, “What makes me, a sinful man, acceptable to be in covenant relationship with holy God?” And for biblical covenants, the answer to this first question is always 100% grace received by faith. That’s what makes you acceptable. Whether you are talking about the Abrahamic Covenant or the Mosaic Covenant or the New Covenant it is by grace through faith. Even the Davidic Covenant, that was not earned by David or his line, that was given by grace, and they accepted it. We saw this with Abraham. What was Abraham doing when God walked through the sacrificed pieces of the covenant oath in Genesis 15? Abraham was as passive as a person can be without being dead. There was not active righteousness required on Abraham’s part, he was in a deep sleep. And Genesis 15:6 had already declared him righteous by faith. God stepped in and took the covenant oath himself. It makes no sense, according to the rules of covenant, but he did it. He effectively said, “If you break covenant with me, I will die.” It is by grace through faith. And we see the same symbolism in the Mosaic covenant with the Passover Lamb. God’s people are saved from wrath by the blood of the Lamb. They are made acceptable by grace through faith. And we are going to see that again in Leviticus, and again in Numbers, and again in Deuteronomy.

Right now, in Leviticus our main concern is not the first question of covenant but the second question of covenant, which is this, “Having entered into relationship with God by grace through faith, how ought I now live?” Establishing expectations between the great King and his people is a major point of covenant. That is what covenant is all about. That is what the stipulations are all about, to tell us what is expected, how to live. God has redeemed Israel. Now he is communicating to them how he expects them to live. When a good Jew, living any time after Moses and before Jesus, asked the second question of covenant, “How ought I live?” The answer was, “Live according to the covenant stipulations given in the Torah. That is your covenant. Those are your commands.”

Okay, so with that understanding of covenant in place, we come back to the question we have as Christians, “What authority does the Mosaic covenant have over me?” To answer that, I say, “None, none.” I do not obey any of the Torah stipulations out of commitment to the Mosaic covenant because I am not under the Mosaic covenant. That was their covenant. That is not our covenant. I am not bound by any of that out of covenant obligation. When I ask the second question of covenant, “Now that I am in relationship with God by grace through faith, how then ought I live?”, the answer for me is, “live according the stipulations of the New Covenant. Live according to the sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-8, according to the application section of Romans chapters 12-15, according to the second half of Ephesians, which teaches us who to walk worthy of the gospel, chapters 4-6.” There is plenty of law in the New Covenant of grace when we define law as the commands or stipulations, the dos and don’ts of covenant. You are to obey the expectations of the covenant that you are under. And you are under the New Covenant if you have placed your faith in Christ.

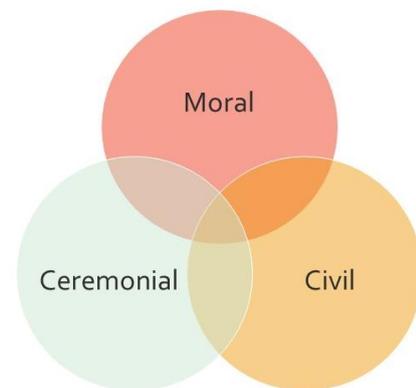
Our New Covenant does still exist in relationship to the Old Covenant. We still have to talk about what is that relationship. There is a sense of continuity. The Old is fulfilled in the New. The Old is also the historical prologue of the New Covenant. And the historical prologue of covenant helps to define the history of relationship between the great King, between God and between his vassal people. So, we as New Covenant believers, if we want to understand our relationship with God, it starts all the way back with creation in Genesis 1. That all still applies to us as truth. All the history, the doctrine, the wisdom still stands as true and as useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). But the stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant are not our stipulations.

And we are usually ready to accept that when it comes to the laws about food or washing or sacrifice. But what about the 10 Commandments? What about laws against adultery, laws against theft and murder and the requirement to love God and neighbor. Don’t those laws still apply to us as New Covenant believers? I believe the answer is, “Yes.” If you noticed, I was careful to say I do not have a covenant obligation to the laws of Moses. But might there be a different kind of obligation? Some people would say that the only obligation that matters is the New Covenant. But then they would go on to say, “And all these moral requirements, everything about adultery and about loving your neighbor and about theft, that is all repeated in the New Covenant.” So, we do not need the Old

Covenant. We can just obey the New. And that is a pretty good answer. But I would say something a little bit different.

I believe that we are bound by covenant obligation and our obligation as Christians is to the New Covenant, not to the Old. But in addition to that I believe we are bound to the moral nature of God, which transcends all covenants. Some covenant laws are in the covenant because God has a plan for his people that requires certain behaviors. For example, eat no shrimp. If that is a stipulation of our covenant, we are obliged to keep it. But it is not a stipulation grounded in the moral nature of God. So, God is free to lift that requirement any time he sees fit to do so. But God would never lift the prohibition against adultery. Adultery goes against the moral nature of God. And God would never lift the prohibition against idolatry. It is never good to worship false gods. False worship goes against the moral nature of God. So, this is how I would say it. We do not obey these moral commands because we have obligation to obey them under Mosaic covenant. We obey these commands because we have obligation to live according to the holy and good nature of God. If he has revealed that nature in Mosaic covenant, then it transcends that covenant, and we are obliged to live according to that revelation.

I am going to talk more about how we distinguish between a law that comes out of the moral nature of God and a law that does not in our next lesson when we address the moral purity code in 18-20. For now, I will suggest a three-part distinction that is often applied to the Mosaic law that I think is very helpful. We can divide the law into these three broad categories: moral laws, ceremonial laws, and civil laws. The 10 Commandments are good examples of moral laws. Civil laws govern society, so laws about criminal punishments or about slavery or about the jubilee year or gleaning in a field, those are civil laws. And then the rituals, sacrifices, and priesthood requirements are all ceremonial laws. These categories are a bit abstract. They are not very precise, moral, ceremonial, and civil. If you really want to study Mosaic law you need some more specific legal terms. And again, next lesson I will give you some of those. But for our purpose as Christians trying to understand what does and does not apply to us, these broad abstract categories are actually quite helpful, moral, ceremonial, civil, give us a general way of thinking about the law.



Israel was a geo-political entity. Geo means a place. It had a geographic place, and it had a political reality, a leadership. It was a theocratic nation, so a nation under God. The ceremonial and civil requirements for the nation Israel do not line up with the new conception of the people of God that came under the New Covenant. We are not a geo-political entity. We are a spiritual community of people bound together by a shared faith in Jesus Christ. That is something radically different. It is a new wineskin. If we try to live according to the law of the old Mosaic Covenant, our wineskin is going to burst. It was not created for that. So, we are taught to let go of the ceremonial and civil code of the Old as not applying to the New Covenant body of believers. Those laws are either fulfilled in Christ or not applicable to God's purposes for the New Covenant community. At the same time, we recognize that some of the laws of Mosaic covenant exists as expressions of God's moral nature. And God's moral nature is the same yesterday and today and forever. It transcends covenant.

We then have the sometimes, difficult challenge of determining whether a command is moral, ceremonial, or civil. And I find it pretty helpful to think about these categories as a venn diagram with moral, ceremonial, and civil each being a circle, and they all overlap each other. And right in the center all three of them are overlapping. So, think of three overlapping circles. And then with each law that we consider, we to think is it clearly in one circle or not. Is it clearly moral, clearly civil, clearly ceremonial or could it overlap between two different categories or is it in the very middle where it is all three categories? For example, the gleaning law, the law to go over your field only once

at harvest and then let poor people come behind and collect what is left, that law seems to be a civil law. It is telling people how to harvest. But it is also a law of generosity. There is a moral principle there for caring for the poor in society. Even more than that, it is not just to care for the poor, it is to give the poor an opportunity to work, so that they can gather in for themselves what they will eat. So, there certainly seems to be a moral principle involved, but we would never argue that it is a priori sinful, it is automatically sinful for a farmer to go over his field twice. It is just sinful because God said, we are not going to do it that way. So, the law of gleaning seems to exist in an overlap between certainly civil and maybe a moral principle. How about the Sabbath? That's a tough one to place. It seems civil in creating a seven-day work week and requiring everybody, including animals and slaves to rest on the seventh day. But it is also ceremonial. It is regarded as a day of worship to God and a day to be in fellowship with others. But it is also in the 10 commandments. Is there a moral principle to rest? Depending on your conclusion to that, you might put the Sabbath at the intersection of all three circles.

So, this is the challenge of considering how Old Covenant laws apply. Some clearly do not. Some clearly do. And some are hard to figure out. Are there moral principles we should apply even if we do not apply the exact details of a specific law? If in doubt, I recommend taking your cue from the New Covenant. What is clearly required there? Because that is our covenant. If we want to show love to God by keeping his commandments, there is plenty to keep us occupied in the New Covenant. But we also believe in the whole of the Bible. And we want to know God's Word fully. So, we are going to focus on the New Covenant, but we are also going to learn as much as we can about the goodness and the beauty and the truth of God through his revealed Word in the Old and in the New.

Reflection Questions

1. When you look through the purity code in Leviticus 11-15, what are some things that stand out to you as particularly interesting?
2. Looking over the whole, do you see a connection with life and death in the various clean and unclean categories? Do you see any other general connections between the various laws?
3. In Leviticus 11:44, God tells the Israelites to consecrate themselves (presumably through keeping the cleanliness code) because he is their Lord, and he is holy. What are some behaviors that Christians might perform today, that are not strictly required by moral law, but could be practiced as a reminder that they belong to God and are set apart for relationship and service? What might we do in our homes or in our worship gatherings or through our day to honor God or to symbolically remind ourselves that are in special relationship with a holy God?
4. What do you think about the fourth function of the holiness code to forbid pagan religious practices occurring in surrounding cultures, like cutting the body, boiling a kid in its mother's milk, or tattooing your body? How does the recognition of this function help you understand some of these laws?
5. How would you answer the accusation, "You Christians just choose from the Old Covenant law what you want to keep and ignore what you do not like?"
6. How would you answer the question, "What in the Levitical Code are we obliged to obey as New Covenant believers?"