

Can God Tell me what to Eat? **Leviticus 11:1-15:33**

When my sister went to school, they had this new system for helping children learn about numbers. I'm a couple of years older than my sister and so I missed out on the educational aspects of the system – but she managed to reap the benefits of this marvellous new technique they introduced. It was a system called Cuisenaire rods.

The idea behind the system was to give some concrete expression to numbers. After all, numbers are such an abstract concept for children to get their heads round. There were ten different coloured rods – although they weren't really rods since they were square at the ends rather than round.

- Each colour represented a different number from 1 to 10. I don't remember now what the actual colours were – that wasn't what was important. What was important was all the 1s were the same colour and all the 2s were the same colour and so on.
- It was also important that all the 1s were the same length. That way you could easily recognise them. You could tell what number a bit of wood was by its colour and its length.
- The other important thing was that if you put two 1s together end-to-end, that was the same length as one of the 2s. And if you put two 2s together end-to-end, that was the same length as one of the 4s.

In other words, you could introduce the idea of addition. If I wanted to know what 3+6 was, I'd get a 3 rod and a 6 rod and put them together and then find out which rod was the same length as the two of them. And with such a confusing explanation of the system you can work out

why I'm not a kindergarten teacher!

In terms of the rods, they weren't the real thing. The rods themselves weren't numbers. They were merely a system used to help children understand numbers. Once they understood the numbers, they could leave the rods behind – or use them to build toy houses, which is what I did with my sister's set. Some people have likened Leviticus and many of these regulations about cleanness and uncleanness to that. This was a system God used to teach His people certain important lessons. The system wasn't an end in itself. It pointed to a reality that lay behind the system. It's the reality that's important. What's the reality we're supposed to learn?

Distinguishing the Clean and Unclean

You may remember last week I drew your attention to Leviticus 10:8-11. Have a look at those verses again.

Then the LORD said to Aaron, "You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the Tent of Meeting, or you will die. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and you must teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses."

Chapters 11 to 15 give many details about what's clean and unclean in a range of everyday life situations.

- Chapter 11 provides details about clean and unclean food – that's something that's pretty basic to life.
- Chapter 12 talks about a woman being unclean after childbirth – something that may not be part of everyday life, but which is still part of life as it usually goes on.

- Chapters 13 and 14 talk about various skin diseases and about mildew that may attach itself to various utensils or buildings and when that makes someone or something unclean.
- Chapter 15 talks about various regular bodily emissions and how long a person's unclean after having one of those emissions.

It's the stuff of everyday life. It's not religious stuff. It's not ceremonial stuff. It's the stuff of normal living. It's in the area of everyday, normal life that the priests and the people have to learn what's involved in staying clean and being holy.

Now, I suspect most of us struggle with these chapters. This morning I'm going to concentrate on chapter 11 – the one about clean and unclean food. I'm doing that because I can't cover all five chapters in detail this morning and because I think chapter 11's probably the safest chapter to deal with. But most of what I say about chapter 11 could equally be said about the other chapters – it's just that I'm going to let you work out how it relates to those other chapters yourselves.

The Concept of Clean Food

I suspect one of the main reasons most of us struggle with chapter 11 is we don't understand *why* some animals are put into the clean category and other animals into the unclean category. Here we have various lists of animals:

- lists of mammals,
- lists of fish,
- lists of birds, and
- lists of insects.

If the animal's in the clean category, the Israelites can eat it. If it's in the unclean category, then they can't eat it.

That's pretty straight forward. It's really not difficult to understand. But we want to know why. Why are these unclean animals forbidden? What makes them unclean? Why can't they eat sweet and sour pork or shrimp cocktail?

Some of the Suggested Rationales

People come up with all sorts of suggestions as to why animals were put into different categories. One fairly common suggestion relates to health. It's said these unclean animals often carry parasites that could lead to disease in humans. Pork, for example, often carries trichinosis and rabbits carry tularaemia. It's said God used these laws to protect His people from these diseases. However, there are problems with this suggestion.

- First, if pork's cooked properly, it's very rare the disease will result. Why didn't God just tell them how to cook pork instead of forbidding it? The other nations of that time enjoyed pork without too many problems – why couldn't Israel?
- Secondly, some of the clean animals can also carry disease-causing parasites from time to time. In recent years, for example, we've heard of Mad Cow Disease and Bird Flu. Paul could probably provide other examples. If health were the issue, why were these clean animals not banned as well?
- Thirdly, when we get to the New Testament, Jesus declares all foods clean. Does this mean God's no longer concerned about the health of His people? Did God no longer want to protect them?

What's more, this reason would mean nothing to the Israelites. They didn't know the scientific details about germs and parasites and hygiene. Sure, God may be protecting them from their own ignorance – but at the

level of their own understanding, they wouldn't have had a clue about why some animals were clean and others not. They wouldn't understand what these laws were about.

Others suggest the reason relates to other religions of the time. It's said the Canaanite religion used pigs as sacrifices in their rituals – and so God told the Israelites they weren't allowed to use pigs in their rituals. It's part of being different from the other nations – part of how they stand out as being holy. The problem with that explanation is that many of the animals categorised as clean were also used as sacrifices in the Canaanite religions. In other words, it may explain why they couldn't use pigs, but it doesn't explain why they could use bulls.

Some people try allegorical explanations. They look for hidden meanings in these rules and regulations. For example, Philo suggests cud-chewing animals were clean because they teach us important lessons about approaching God's word. Cows chew their food and store it away for a while and then chew it some more before it passes into their bellies. Similarly, students of God's word are to chew over what they're taught, store it away for a while, chew over it some more, and thus gain greatest benefit for their lives. Bonar suggests the association of pigs with mud and filth is what puts them in the unclean category. The problem with most allegorical explanations is they impose something on the text from the outside. They depend on the imagination of the interpreter and not what's in the text itself.

There are three suggested explanations. They start off sounding OK – but when you think about them for a little while, it doesn't take too long to come up with problems.

There are plenty of other suggestions as well. I'm not going to bore you with them all this morning. They too have their problems. The point is: we humans want an explanation. We see these rules about clean and unclean animals and we want to know what makes the difference. We want to know why these Israelites couldn't enjoy a ham and tomato sandwich.

Our Desire for Reasons

Now, there's nothing wrong with such curiosity in itself. It's part of how we are as rational beings. God made us with minds that think. In the long run, however, in this case we have to admit the text doesn't tell us. It simply says: God says these animals are clean – you can eat them; God says these animals are unclean – you can't eat them. God doesn't give a reason. We can search for the reason. We can make up our own possibilities as to what the reason may be – but that's all they are: our own made-up possibilities.

What's more, God doesn't have to give a reason. God's not answerable to us. That comes as a shock to some people. Some think we humans are the ones running the earth and we decide what's right and wrong and what's fair and unfair. That's not true. God's the One who's boss. He chooses what's right and wrong. He chooses whether or not He provides us with reasons.

Why do we want reasons? Several possibilities.

- We want to understand. We're a curious bunch who like to know how the world operates and why it operates that way. We're also curious about God and how God operates and why He operates the way He does.

- We want to evaluate. We think if we understand how things operate in one area, we'll be able to develop principles to help us in other areas. We're looking for guidance on how to live.
- We want to motivate. We think knowing the reasons and knowing the validity of those reasons helps us do the right thing. We think we're more likely to do something if we realise there's a valid reason for doing it. We'll do something if it can be shown it's actually in our best interests to do it.
- We want to judge. We think we have the ability to work out what's right and wrong. We want God to give us reasons we can subject to our judgment so we can determine whether God's reasons are up-to-scratch – whether they persuade me to submit.
- We want to find loopholes. There's a bit of lawyer in each of us. The more information we have, the more legitimate excuses we can find to justify us doing what we want to do.
- We want to control. We think if we can understand the reasons and the principles behind those reasons, then we'll understand the principles whereby we can manipulate God to our own will.

Somewhere in that list of rationales, the border is crossed – the border between what's perfectly acceptable and what's an expression of rebellion against God.

What if God's reason for banning the eating of pigs was He didn't like the colour of their eyes? What will you do with that reason?

- Will you say to God: That doesn't seem a very good reason to me, so I'm going to ignore Your rules and eat pork?
- Will you say to God: Well, I like the colour of their

eyes just fine, so I don't think Your reason applies to me, and so it's OK for me to have ham?

Do your arguments or rationalisations justify disobedience towards God?

It's one of the dangers of our egalitarian and democratic society. We emphasise individual rights and equality and opportunity and things like that – and there are some very important truths there. We're taught to question authority and the imposition of arbitrary laws that offend our individual rights – and there are some very important truths there. Yet, it's a problem when we apply that same thinking to God and our attitude to God's authority. We aren't equal with God – and never will be. We aren't in the same category as God – for He's unique. We do not sit in judgment on God and His ways. Our role's to submit to our Creator.

God asks us to trust Him. These Israelites may not have had a clue as to why God declared some animals off-limits. It doesn't matter. God asks them to trust Him and to submit to Him. There doesn't have to be any reason other than God said so.

The Concept of Clean Food Today

Perhaps the important question for us is whether these food laws still apply to us today. Now, at this point, some of you may be a bit worried. This morning you got some pork chops out of the freezer. They're currently sitting on your sink thawing. You plan to cook them for lunch. This could be a very practical issue for you. Are you allowed to eat them or not? Will you perhaps have to consign them to the dog's dinner plate? Will God be worried about whether your dog's in an unclean state? Or

are you just going to go home and have them even if God says you can't?

What Jesus Says

Have a look at Mark 7:14-23

Again Jesus called the crowd to Him and said, "Listen to Me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean'."

After He had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples asked Him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" He asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean'.) He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'."

Jesus says the real issue of uncleanness has to do with human hearts. It's not what you put into your mouth that makes you unclean. It's not the issue of what comes into contact with your body that makes you unclean. The issue isn't hygiene. Real uncleanness has to do with sin. With sin, the problem is it's already there in your heart. It's not that you risk some contamination from the outside. Rather, you're already contaminated on the inside.

Where's evil come from?

- When I say something nasty to you or about you, was it because of some virus I picked up when Fred sneezed? Did those words come out of my mouth because I ate some ham? No – that evil comes out of my mouth because there's already evil in my heart.
- When I steal your money, is it because I've been made unclean by touching a dead animal? Do I take your things because I've eaten a few prawns? No – I do that evil because there's already evil in my heart.

Thus, the real problem that needs to be dealt with isn't my diet – whether I eat fatty pork or lean beef won't make me any closer to God (although the heart experts suggest that, if you persist in eating the fatty stuff, you may get to stand before God earlier than you'd prefer). Rather, the real problem in terms of my uncleanness before God is my heart. The evil's within. That's why Jesus offers a new heart to those who follow Him.

It's important to remember what Jesus teaches here. Sin's not something external to us. It's not that we're all basically good – it's just we're brought up in a bad environment or taught the wrong thing by our parents or bullied badly at school and so now we're a mess. The mess is within us. It's always been within us since Adam and Eve rebelled against God. The problem's not the external circumstances in which we find ourselves – the real problem's our hearts. The evil resides within and comes out the mouth – and all the other parts of our bodies.

Don't we Need their Lessons?

Yet, this isn't new. It's been our problem ever since the Garden of Eden. It's already the problem when God gave

Israel these food regulations. It didn't change somewhere between Moses and Jesus. Why did they have to worry about their food and we don't? Why were they forbidden pork and not us?

Ultimately, I don't know. I know what the law says. I know what Jesus and the rest of the New Testament say. I don't know why there's a difference. With the sacrifices I can see how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament shadow and why we no longer hang onto the shadow because the reality's come. But I can't see that the New Testament says Jesus fulfils this stuff about clean and unclean animals the same way. It seems different. The answer's tied up with the way Jesus fulfils the law – but I've struggled with this in relation to this particular issue and haven't yet come up with an answer I'm totally happy with.

However, I think we can still say a couple of positive things – things that remain important for us today. What is it that God taught through all these regulations about cleanness and uncleanness? I want to highlight two things. First, it reinforced for the people that it's a serious thing for them to approach a holy God. It's something we've noted in the earlier chapters. Everything's divided into different categories. It's important they distinguish between these categories. It's something like the Cuise-naire rods. The priests were to help them in this regard.

- Things are either holy or they're common.
- Common things are either clean or unclean.

Effectively, that means there are three categories:

- Holy;
- Clean; and
- Unclean.

It was important the unclean not come in contact with the

holy.

People could move between these categories. A person could become unclean through contact with something else unclean. While a person was in an unclean state, it was important they not approach the sanctuary – that they not approach the place that symbolised God's dwelling among them. Such an approach would likely have disastrous consequences. Before an unclean person could approach the sanctuary, they had to remove the uncleanness by going through the appropriate cleansing. In this way, they became clean again.

To approach the holy God isn't a trivial thing for creatures who don't measure up to His holy standards. We get so used to our own unholiness, we tend to forget that. We do tend to think of it as natural – even as our right. This system reminded them over and over that there's a problem with them just waltzing into God's presence in their uncleanness. Today, we're reminded of it by the fact the only way we can approach God is because Jesus died for us – because God became man and was crucified to pay the penalty for our uncleanness. The matter's that serious.

A second lesson taught by this system is that all of life impacts on our relationship with God. We Westerners compartmentalise life. We divide our lives into different and separate segments. It's something that's come to us from the impact of Greek culture around the time of Jesus. And so, for example, we tend to divide work off from leisure – a segment of our lives is tied up with work and a different segment is tied up with leisure and we try to keep the two segments separate. We divide the physi-

cal and the spiritual – there's the physical side of our beings that's tied very much to this world and we control that for ourselves and there's the spiritual side of our beings that relates to things not of this world and for which we're responsible to God. You can see it in people's attitude to church. Some people think their relationship with God consists only of what goes on inside the church building.

- Thus, God hears their prayers when they're inside the church building better than when they're outside it.
- God pays more attention to their behaviour inside the church building than He does to their behaviour in how they drive their cars to get to it.
- God's worried about how they sing the hymns in church but He's not worried about how they eat their food or how much food they waste.

It's not the Bible's view. It's not God's view.

These regulations in Leviticus demonstrate that. God's interested in the whole of their lives – and how they live the whole of their lives. What they ate for breakfast could prevent them turning up at the sanctuary that afternoon. Whether they'd contacted a corpse could stop them bringing a sacrifice for the next few hours. These everyday things had an impact on whether they were fit to approach God.

The food laws were part of that overall system. They're a constant reminder that things aren't all right between man and God. They're a constant reminder that it's easy to offend God when one lives in a world contaminated by sin and death. They're a constant reminder that they're called to live separate from that world – to be holy. Some

point out that many of these food laws carry a reminder of death – a reminder of God's punishment on human sin.

- Contacting a dead animal caused uncleanness.
- Many of the unclean animals were carnivores – that is, they lived off the death of other animals.

Indeed, it may well be that this association with death is the rationale behind these laws of uncleanness. But again, we're not told.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus has dealt with uncleanness in every area of our lives. His death on the cross for us dealt with the enormity of our sin in every facet. Because of Him, we can freely enter God's presence. We're also free to eat all types of food. We can go onto numbers and leave the Cuisenaire rods behind. We can live in Jesus and leave the food laws behind. The reality's come – we no longer need the model.

Yet, we're not free to be controlled by food – whether it be gluttony or drunkenness or gourmetism or wastefulness. Nor are we to turn this freedom into an excuse to go out and do as we please with our lives – that's what's at the centre of the sinful life we've abandoned in favour of Jesus. Rather, it's a call to live holy lives – to live in a distinct way from those around us. And it isn't simply a matter of coming to church on Sundays – it's a distinctness that's to permeate our whole lives. Each part of our lives falls under the rule of our holy God. Our God calls us to purity – that hasn't changed one bit. Such purity can only come from a changed heart that comes from Jesus.