

Holiness had a spatial dimension in the Old Testament, and contact of the unclean with the sanctuary was the ultimate defilement (15:31). When Jesus touched the leper and the woman touched the hem of his garment, these unclean individuals were in contact with the very presence of God (tabernacle/temple in OT), which would result in the most austere defilement. And yet Jesus' response on both occasions indicates that with his presence, with the presence of God incarnate in a human body, a change has occurred. The presence of God was no longer confined to a special hill in Jerusalem but stood in the midst of the people. Jesus did not become unclean in having contact with the unclean. The law regarding uncleanness was forever changed, for the fulfillment of the tabernacle/temple type had arrived in history. No longer do certain maladies place one outside the camp. The Messiah has fulfilled these laws and their function has changed.

Yet the principle behind the purity laws, the call to holiness, has not changed for the New Testament believer. Like the dietary laws the principle behind these laws of uncleanness is in effect. Holiness is to be practiced and demonstrated by those who are God's people today. Just as sacrifices have been fulfilled in Christ and we are to offer spiritual sacrifices, the laws of impurity have served their purpose; but the principles behind them are still to be carried out by those God has called. In Paul's charge for the Corinthian church to be holy (2 Cor 6:17) he admonishes them in the language of Leviticus: "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." Poythress comments on the significance of Paul's use of the levitical law:

Paul's use of the Old Testament here is quite in line with its real meaning. The disorders of unclean things in the Old Testament symbolically indicate the disorders of sin itself.... Israel's separation from unclean foods also proclaims its obligation to be a uniquely holy nation, a kingdom of priests. In the Old Testament the principles of holiness and separation were temporarily expressed on a symbolic, physical level in the distinction between clean and unclean foods.

Since these laws of uncleanness were fulfilled with the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the kingdom of God, there has been a shift from the cultic to the ethical application of these laws in the New Testament (Matt 5:8; 1 Tim 1:5; 2 Tim 2:22; 1 Pet 1:22; Acts 15:9). This change has Old Testament roots (Pss 24:4; 51:12). A similar shift is seen in the important covenant law of circumcision, which has new meaning in the New Testament (Rom 2:28–29; Col 2:11). Again, however, the spiritual significance of even this shift was not unknown in the Old Testament (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4).

The Pharisees overlooked the spiritual intent of these purity laws and overemphasized their ritual nature (Matt 23:23). For this they were renounced by Jesus Christ (Matt 15:10–20; 23:25–28).

The idea of the church being separate from the world as Israel was from the nations has relevance for believers today. It seems to have become the practice of modern evangelicals to diminish the differences between the church and the world in an unwise attempt to make the Christian faith more attractive to those outside the household of faith. Jesus' command to the church to be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matt 5:48) is harmonious with Israel's call to be holy as God is holy.

Another way the laws of uncleanness are fulfilled in the New Testament is in the matter of ritual cleansing through the use of water. The Old Testament cleansing agents foreshadow the cleansing of water baptism (Eph 5:25–26). Baptism now signifies not removal of physical uncleanness but a good conscience before God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 3:21). All believers are now cleansed, for God purifies the heart (Acts 15:9).

Part of the difficulty of determining the rationale behind the dietary laws is the fact that the reason they are given is not stated. Motivations are not provided, but the Israelite is to submit with obedience because these laws, like ethical laws, reflect the will of God for Israel and reflect God's character. Thus the ultimate reason for these laws was simply that God commanded them. S. R. Hirsch captures the essence of these unique commands:

High above all human speculations stands the Torah, the law of Israel's life, eternal and immutable like the laws by which the planets move in the sky and the grain of seed grows in the soil. It is the same God Who laid down the law which Nature follows of necessity Who pronounced the law which Israel is asked to follow of its own free will. And just as the laws of Nature are unchangeable—despite any opinion man may hold—so all speculations on the laws of the Torah can only be an enlightenment of our own minds, but never the cause of their validity; for the *causa causarum* of the laws of Nature as well as the laws of the Torah is—God.

With the present stage of our understanding the best explanation of the categorical distinction between clean and unclean is that these have been categories decreed by God to make Israel a holy nation. Not only would the observance of these laws demonstrate Israel's distinctiveness from the other nations but it also would be an indication of their supreme commitment to their covenant with God.³⁰ When a Jew obeyed these laws, it would not be possible for him to share some kinds of food with his pagan neighbor, so food functioned as a barrier to their association. As Milgrom concludes, "The separation of the animals into the pure and the impure is both a model and a lesson for Israel to separate itself from the nations."

In this regard the eating laws would be similar to the first law given to Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of good and evil. There was nothing inherently evil about the tree, but it was off-limits simply because God had declared it to be so. The first law given by God was a dietary law. It should not be overlooked, however, that the foods considered clean were not only those appropriate for offering to God in sacrifice but were from among the domesticated, tame animals.³³ And since the offerer would often partake of the food himself in the sacrificial meal, there should be no surprise that what was appropriate for God would be appropriate for the worshiper. In this sense when the Israelite ate his food, he would be imitating God. This fact alone explains the connection between eating of clean food and holiness.¹

¹ Rooker, M. F. (2000). [*Leviticus*](#) (Vol. 3A, pp. 209–210). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.