

The Book of Leviticus, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Clean and Unclean Foods

Leviticus 11:1–47

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake here is the relationship between the Old Law and the New Covenant, and the unchanging character of God beneath both. The dietary code of Leviticus 11 was genuinely from God and genuinely binding on Israel for their time, teaching the seriousness of holiness and separation. But it was a shadow cast forward toward Christ. The teacher must hold two truths together without confusion: these food laws are no longer binding on Christians (Mark 7:18–19; Acts 10; Colossians 2:16–17; 1 Timothy 4:3–5), and yet the command that crowns the chapter, 'be holy, for I am holy,' is carried straight into the New Covenant by Peter (1 Peter 1:15–16). The regulation changed; the God behind it did not. Guard against two errors: binding the ceremonial law on Christians, and dismissing the chapter as irrelevant. Both miss the point.

For the student's spiritual formation, this lesson presses the question of whether God has any claim on the ordinary. Israel could not eat a meal without remembering whose they were. We are tempted to compartmentalize, to be the Lord's on Sunday and our own the rest of the week. Leviticus 11 dismantles that. Holiness is not a religious specialty; it is the whole of life lived as God's own. The aim is to move students from rule-keeping anxiety to relationship-rooted distinctiveness, helping them see that the same God who set Israel apart now sets us apart in Christ, and that being different from the world is not a burden but the joyful mark of belonging to Him.

Finally, point the class to Jesus. The chapter teaches that death defiles and that the unclean must be kept at arm's length. Then Christ comes and touches the leper, and instead of becoming unclean He makes the unclean clean (Mark 1:40–42). The gospel reverses the flow. In Him the dividing lines fall, the nations are welcomed (Acts 10), and a holy people is gathered not by diet but by the blood of the Lamb and the call to walk worthy of His name.

Question 1

Student Question:

According to Leviticus 11:44–45, what is the stated reason Israel was to distinguish between clean and unclean, and what does this teach us about the source and goal of all true holiness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The whole chapter has been building toward verses 44 and 45, and here the curtain is pulled back to reveal the reason for everything that came before. "For I am the LORD your God: ye

shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy.” Every distinction between clean and unclean, every restriction at the table, traces back to a single source: the character of God. Holiness is not first a list of behaviors Israel must perform; it is the radiant otherness of God Himself, and His people are summoned to mirror it.

Notice the logic. The command does not say ‘be holy so that I will become your God.’ It says ‘be holy, for I am holy,’ and ‘I am the LORD your God’ who already brought you up out of Egypt (11:45). The relationship comes first; the holiness flows from it. This is gospel order even in Leviticus. God redeems, then God sanctifies. Israel does not earn belonging through clean eating; they express belonging because they already belong to the One who delivered them.

The Hebrew idea behind ‘holy’ is separation, being set apart, distinct, devoted. God is utterly separate from all that is false, defiled, and dead. When He calls His people to be holy, He is calling them to share His distinctiveness, to be marked off from the corruption around them. The food laws made that abstract truth concrete three times a day.

The goal of holiness, then, is not human achievement but divine likeness. We become holy not by inventing our own standard but by reflecting His. This is why Peter can lift this very verse straight into the church: ‘as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation’ (1 Peter 1:15). The specific regulations changed at the cross, but the foundation, God’s own holy character, is bedrock that never moves.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Holiness originates in the character of God, not in human rule-keeping; we reflect His holiness rather than manufacture our own.
- Redemption precedes sanctification even in the Old Testament; God delivered Israel first, then called them to holiness.
- The Hebrew sense of ‘holy’ is set apart, distinct, devoted; God is separate from all defilement and death.
- 1 Peter 1:15–16 carries this exact command into the New Covenant, showing the unchanging basis of holiness.
- The dietary regulations were the schoolroom; the holiness of God was the abiding lesson.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that God says ‘be holy, for I am holy’ rather than ‘be holy so I will accept you’?
- How does grounding holiness in God’s character protect us from both legalism and license?
- Where do you most need to remember that you are called to reflect God’s holiness, not invent your own?

Question 2

Student Question:

These laws governed something as ordinary as a meal. What does it reveal about your view of God when you imagine Him caring about the small, daily details of your life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

It is striking that the God of Sinai concerns Himself with what an Israelite family puts in the cooking pot. The same Lord who governs the stars governs the supper. This collapses the false divide we so easily build between the 'spiritual' and the 'ordinary.' For Israel there was no such divide. Every meal was lived before the face of God.

Our temptation is to imagine God interested only in the big moments: the worship assembly, the crisis prayer, the deathbed. Leviticus 11 says otherwise. The God who cares about your breakfast cares about your whole life. Nothing is too small for His claim, because everything belongs to Him already.

This is not the pettiness of a micromanaging deity but the intimacy of a Father who wants His children's whole lives. A parent who only cared about a child's grand achievements and ignored the daily routines would be a distant parent. God draws near to the dailiness of Israel's life precisely because He loves them.

When we grasp that God cares about the small details, two things happen. First, ordinary life becomes sacred ground, an arena for worship. Second, we lose every hiding place; there is no corner of life we can fence off as 'none of God's business.' The dinner table becomes an altar, and so does the office, the car, the phone, the budget.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's holiness reaches into ordinary daily life, not just sacred assemblies.
- There is no neutral zone where God has no claim; everything belongs to Him.
- God's interest in small details reflects fatherly intimacy, not petty control.
- Ordinary life becomes an arena for worship when lived before God's face.
- Compartmentalizing faith into 'religious' moments contradicts the whole-life holiness of Scripture.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it stir in you to imagine God caring about the smallest details of your day?
- Which 'ordinary' area of your life do you most often treat as off-limits to God?
- How might naming your meals, work, or spending as God's territory change how you live this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

How do the food laws function to set Israel apart from the surrounding nations, and why was that visible distinctiveness so important to God's purposes for His people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The food laws drew a visible line between Israel and the nations. A people who could not share certain meals, who refused certain meats, who organized their whole diet around God's word, could not blend invisibly into pagan society. The distinction was the point. God was creating a people noticeably His in a world that had forgotten Him.

This visible separateness served God's larger purpose. Israel was to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6), and you cannot be a light by looking exactly like the darkness around you. The very strangeness of Israel's life was meant to provoke the question: why do these people live this way? And the answer always pointed back to their God.

Deuteronomy ties the dietary laws directly to Israel's identity: 'For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God' (Deuteronomy 14:21). The diet was a daily declaration of allegiance. To eat as Israel ate was to confess, in the most tangible way, 'I belong to the LORD, not to the gods of Egypt or Canaan.'

The principle abides even though the regulation does not. God still calls His people to be visibly distinct, not by diet but by holy living, love, integrity, and refusal to be conformed to the world (Romans 12:2). The church is meant to look different, to provoke the watching world to ask what makes us so, and to be ready to answer that it is Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The dietary laws made Israel visibly distinct from idolatrous nations.
- Distinctiveness served God's mission; a light cannot illumine by hiding.
- Deuteronomy 14:21 ties the diet directly to Israel's identity as a holy people.
- The principle of visible distinctiveness abides though the specific regulation does not.
- Romans 12:2 calls Christians to refuse conformity to the world while remaining engaged with it.

Discussion Prompts

- How was Israel's distinctiveness meant to serve, not just separate them from, the nations?
- In what ways is the church tempted to look exactly like the surrounding culture?
- What is one visible way your life could prompt someone to ask about your faith?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where do you feel pressure to blend in rather than stand out as a follower of God, and what holds you back from being visibly different?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The pull to blend in is ancient and strong. Israel constantly drifted toward the customs of the nations, and the dietary laws were one of God's guardrails against that drift. To stand out is costly; to fit in is comfortable. Yet God deliberately made His people conspicuous.

We feel the same pull. In a thousand small choices we soften our distinctiveness so as not to seem strange, not to lose status, not to invite questions. The fear of standing out can quietly erode the very holiness God calls us to. We trade the joyful oddness of belonging to God for the dull safety of the crowd.

Yet Scripture never treats distinctiveness as the goal in itself. We are not different for the sake of being different, but different because we belong to a holy God. The strangeness is meaningful only when it points beyond us to Him. Pointless oddity is just self-righteousness; God-rooted distinctiveness is witness.

The question for the student is honest and searching: where does the fear of standing out govern your choices more than the call to be holy? Naming that pressure is the first step to handing it over. Christ Himself was rejected for His distinctiveness, and He calls us to follow without shame (Luke 9:26).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The pull to blend in is constant and was a real danger for Israel.
- Fear of standing out can quietly erode holiness through small compromises.
- Distinctiveness is not an end in itself but a witness pointing to a holy God.
- Pointless oddity is self-righteousness; God-rooted distinctiveness is testimony.
- Christ was rejected for His distinctiveness and calls us to follow without shame.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most feel the pressure to blend in rather than stand out for God?
- How can you tell the difference between godly distinctiveness and mere self-righteous oddity?
- What would it cost you, and what might it gain, to stop hiding your faith this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

The chapter repeatedly connects uncleanness with carcasses and death (11:24–40). What spiritual truth about sin and death might God be teaching through this association?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

A thread runs through the chapter that is easy to miss: uncleanness is repeatedly linked to carcasses and death. Touching the dead body of an unclean animal makes a person unclean until evening (11:24–28); even a clean animal's carcass defiles (11:39–40). Death contaminates. The realm of the dead is the realm of the unclean.

This connection is theological, not merely hygienic. God is the living God, the source of life. Death is the intruder, the consequence of sin, the great enemy. By making contact with death a source of ritual impurity, the law dramatized a deep truth: death and the God of life do not mix. To approach the holy God, one had to be separated from the touch of death.

Sin is woven into this picture. 'The wages of sin is death' (Romans 6:23). The defiling power of death in Leviticus is a visible parable of the defiling power of sin in the soul. Just as a carcass made one ceremonially unclean, so sin makes one spiritually unclean, unfit to draw near to a holy God without cleansing.

This is why the gospel is such stunning news. The law could mark uncleanness but could not finally cleanse it. Christ enters the realm of death itself, takes our defilement upon Himself, and rises, breaking death's contaminating grip. In Him the touch of death is reversed; He makes the dead alive and the unclean clean (Ephesians 2:1–5).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Uncleanness in the chapter is tied repeatedly to carcasses and death.
- The connection is theological: God is the living God, and death is the intruder of sin.
- Death's defiling power pictures sin's defiling power on the soul (Romans 6:23).
- The law could mark uncleanness but could not finally cleanse it.
- Christ enters death, bears our defilement, and rises to make the unclean clean.

Discussion Prompts

- Why might God connect ritual uncleanness so closely with death?
- How does death's defiling power picture the way sin defiles the soul?
- What does it mean to you that Christ enters death itself to make you clean?

Question 6

Student Question:

Are there habits, influences, or 'carcasses' you keep handling that quietly defile your walk with God? What would it look like to put them down?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

If death defiles, the searching question becomes personal: what 'carcasses' do we keep handling? The law's imagery invites honest self-examination. There are habits, relationships,

entertainments, and resentments we return to again and again, knowing they leave us spiritually soiled, yet we keep picking them up.

Sin rarely announces itself as a corpse. It dresses up as harmless, familiar, even necessary. But its effect is the same: it dulls our communion with God, leaves a residue on the conscience, and keeps us at a distance from the holiness we were made for. Naming these things honestly is uncomfortable but freeing.

The law's remedy was separation: put it down, wash, wait until evening. The gospel's remedy is deeper: not merely external washing but a cleansed heart through the blood of Christ (1 John 1:7–9). Yet there is still a call to action, to actually put the defiling thing down rather than nurse it.

Repentance is exactly this: turning loose of what defiles and turning toward the God who cleanses. It is not earning forgiveness but receiving it with open, empty hands. The student is asked to identify one 'carcass' and, in honest dependence on Christ, to lay it down.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin, like a carcass, leaves spiritual defilement on those who keep handling it.
- Sin disguises itself as harmless or necessary rather than as the corpse it is.
- The law's remedy was separation and washing; the gospel's is a cleansed heart.
- Repentance means turning loose of what defiles and turning toward the cleansing God.
- 1 John 1:7–9 promises cleansing through the blood of Christ for the confessing heart.

Discussion Prompts

- What 'carcass' do you find yourself returning to, even knowing it defiles you?
- Why is naming a sin honestly such a crucial first step toward freedom from it?
- What would it look like, practically, to lay one defiling habit down this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

How do passages like Mark 7:18–19, Acts 10:9–16, and Colossians 2:16–17 show that these dietary laws are no longer binding under the New Covenant, and what unchanging principle remains?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

We must handle this carefully and clearly: the dietary laws of Leviticus 11 are not binding on Christians. This is not a human opinion but the plain teaching of the New Testament. In Mark 7:18–19, Jesus explains that food cannot defile the heart, and Mark adds the inspired comment that 'he declared all foods clean' (ESV). The Lawgiver Himself lifted the law.

Peter's rooftop vision in Acts 10:9–16 drives the point home. Three times the sheet of unclean animals descends, and three times the voice declares, 'What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.' The vision's deeper meaning is that the gospel now goes to the Gentiles, but its surface teaching is unmistakable: the old food distinctions no longer bind.

Paul seals it in Colossians 2:16–17: 'Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink... which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.' And in 1 Timothy 4:3–5 he condemns those who forbid foods 'which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving,' for 'every creature of God is good.' The shadow has met its substance.

Why then study the chapter at all? Because the unchanging principle remains: God is holy and calls His people to be holy and distinct. The regulation was a temporary schoolmaster (Galatians 3:24–25); the holiness it taught endures forever. We do not rebuild the menu, but we do recover the heart, a life wholly set apart for God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Mark 7:18–19 records Jesus declaring all foods clean, lifting the dietary law.
- Acts 10:9–16 teaches that God has cleansed what He once called common.
- Colossians 2:16–17 calls the food laws shadows whose substance is Christ.
- 1 Timothy 4:3–5 affirms every creature of God as good, received with thanksgiving.
- The abiding principle is the call to holiness and distinctiveness, not the specific diet.

Discussion Prompts

- How do these New Testament passages together show the dietary laws are no longer binding?
- What unchanging principle from Leviticus 11 still applies to Christians today?
- Why is it important to distinguish a temporary regulation from the abiding truth behind it?

Question 8

Student Question:

When you read that these laws are lifted in Christ, do you feel relief, confusion, or something else? What does your reaction reveal about how you relate rules to relationship with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

How a person reacts to the news that these laws are lifted can be revealing. Some feel relief, glad to be free of a heavy code. Others feel a strange disappointment, as though rules gave them something to hold onto, a measurable way to feel righteous. Still others feel confusion, unsure how a law from God could simply stop applying.

These reactions expose how we relate rules to relationship. If we secretly lean on rule-keeping for our standing before God, the lifting of a rule feels like losing ground. But the gospel teaches

that our standing was never in the rules; it is in Christ. The food laws were never the basis of Israel's acceptance, and certainly are not ours.

At the same time, freedom from a rule is not freedom from holiness. Some hear 'the food laws are lifted' and conclude 'so anything goes.' That is a serious misreading. The specific regulation ended; the call to a holy, set-apart life intensified, now written on the heart rather than carved in code (Hebrews 8:10).

The healthy response is neither legalistic clinging nor careless license, but glad obedience flowing from relationship. We obey not to earn God's love but because we already have it. The student is invited to examine which reaction is theirs, and what it reveals about where they are truly resting.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reactions to the lifting of the law (relief, disappointment, confusion) reveal the heart.
- Leaning on rule-keeping for standing makes losing a rule feel like losing ground.
- Our standing before God was never in the rules but in Christ.
- Freedom from a regulation is not freedom from the call to holiness.
- Healthy obedience flows from relationship, not from earning God's love.

Discussion Prompts

- What is your honest reaction to learning these laws no longer bind you, and why?
- How might leaning on rule-keeping distort your relationship with God?
- What is the difference between obeying to earn love and obeying because you are loved?

Question 9

Student Question:

Leviticus 11 grounds Israel's call to holiness in the holiness of God Himself ('be holy, for I am holy'), a command Peter applies directly to Christians in 1 Peter 1:15–16. Explain how the basis for holiness is identical in both covenants even though the specific regulations changed, and how Christ both fulfills the shadow and empowers the substance.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here is the doctrinal weight of the lesson. The specific regulations of Leviticus 11 changed at the cross, but the basis for holiness did not change at all. In both covenants the foundation is identical: 'be holy, for I am holy.' Compare Leviticus 11:44–45 with 1 Peter 1:15–16, and you find the very same words, the very same logic, the very same God. The ground of holiness is the unchanging character of God, not the shifting details of regulation.

This is crucial for rightly dividing the word. Some imagine the God of the Old Testament is a God of harsh rules and the God of the New is a God of easy grace, as if He changed. Not so. The same

holy God stands behind both Testaments. What changed was the form of the schoolroom, not the Teacher or the lesson. The ceremonial law was a tutor leading to Christ (Galatians 3:24); when Christ came, the tutor's work was finished, but the holiness it taught remains.

Christ both fulfills the shadow and empowers the substance. He fulfills it by being everything the law foreshadowed: the truly clean One, the One who makes the unclean clean, the One in whom the dividing lines dissolve. The Old Law was nailed to His cross (Colossians 2:14), its ceremonies fulfilled and set aside. The shadow has done its work; the body is Christ.

But He does more than end the shadow; He empowers the substance. Under the old covenant, holiness was largely external, written on stone. Under the new, the Spirit writes God's law on the heart (Hebrews 8:10) and Christ Himself dwells in the believer (Galatians 2:20). So holiness is no longer a code we strain to keep at arm's length, but a life Christ produces in us from within. The command is the same; the power to obey it is gloriously greater.

Thus the student stands on solid ground. The God who said 'be holy, for I am holy' to Israel says it still to the church, with the same authority and the same heart. The menu is gone; the mandate abides. And the One who commands holiness now supplies it, having cleansed us by His blood and filled us with His Spirit.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The basis for holiness is identical in both covenants: 'be holy, for I am holy.'
- Leviticus 11:44–45 and 1 Peter 1:15–16 share the same words, logic, and God.
- What changed was the form of regulation, not the character of God or the call to holiness.
- The ceremonial law was a tutor leading to Christ (Galatians 3:24) and finished its work at the cross.
- Christ fulfills the shadow (Colossians 2:14) and empowers the substance by writing the law on the heart (Hebrews 8:10).
- New Covenant holiness is Christ working from within, not merely an external code kept at arm's length.

Discussion Prompts

- How can the basis for holiness be identical in both covenants while the regulations differ?
- Why is it important to insist that the God of both Testaments is the same holy God?
- How does Christ not only end the shadow but also empower the holiness He commands?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back across the whole chapter, name one specific area of ordinary, everyday life where Jesus is calling you to be set apart for Him, and how His own holiness makes that possible rather than burdensome.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

We come full circle to the dinner table where we began, and the question is now deeply personal. Across this whole chapter God has insisted that holiness touches everything, that His people are to be visibly set apart, that the same call rings into the New Covenant. So where, in your ordinary life, is Jesus calling you to be set apart for Him?

It may be your speech, your spending, your screen, your schedule. It may be the way you treat the people closest to you, or the quiet thoughts no one else sees. The chapter refuses to let holiness stay vague or 'spiritual' in the abstract. It lands in the concrete texture of daily life, just as it did for Israel.

What makes this possible, and not crushing, is that the holiness comes from Christ and not from us. We are not asked to manufacture our own purity but to receive His and reflect it. He has cleansed us by His blood; now His Spirit forms His own holiness in us. The burden is light because He carries it with us (Matthew 11:30).

So name one area. Let it be specific, not a vague resolution to 'do better.' And entrust it to the One who is Himself holy, who set Israel apart at the table and sets you apart now, and who delights to make His people His own in every ordinary moment of every ordinary day.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Holiness lands in the concrete texture of daily life, not in vague abstraction.
- The call covers speech, spending, screens, schedule, relationships, and hidden thoughts.
- Christ's holiness, not our own effort, makes the call possible rather than crushing.
- We receive and reflect His purity rather than manufacture our own.
- Specific, named areas of surrender are more transformative than vague resolutions.

Discussion Prompts

- What one specific area of ordinary life is Jesus calling you to set apart for Him?
- How does drawing your holiness from Christ change it from burden to gift?
- What concrete step will you take this week in that one named area?