

The Book of Leviticus

Lesson 7: Clean and Unclean Foods -- Leviticus 11:1-47

Picture an Israelite mother in the wilderness, leaning over a cookfire as the evening light fades. She reaches for the day's food, and in that ordinary moment something extraordinary is happening. The God who split the sea and thundered from Sinai has an opinion about what goes into her pot. Leviticus 11 takes the holiness of God out of the tabernacle and sets it down right in the middle of the kitchen. The chapter walks through animals of the land, fish of the sea, birds of the air, and the swarming things that creep along the ground, sorting them into two columns: clean and unclean. To us it can read like an ancient menu. To Israel it was a daily catechism in what it means to belong to a holy God.

Why would the Lord care about camels and shellfish and grasshoppers? Because He was forming a people who would carry His name among the nations, and He wanted that belonging to touch every hour of every day. There was no neutral moment, no part of life cordoned off from God. Every meal was a small sermon: you are Mine, you are different, you are set apart. The distinctions in this chapter are not arbitrary cruelties. They are the loving fences a Father builds around a people He is teaching to walk with Him, marking Israel out from the idolatrous, death-soaked practices of the nations around them.

The chapter rises to a climax that lifts it far above any list of edible creatures. "For I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy" (11:44). There it is, the heartbeat of the whole book pulsing through the dietary code. Holiness is not first a rulebook; it is the character of God overflowing into the lives of His people. The diet was the schoolroom, but holiness was the lesson. Israel was to be distinct because their God is distinct, separate because He is separate, set apart because He alone is the Holy One.

We need to say clearly, before we walk through these verses, that these food laws are not binding on us today. Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:18-19), Peter learned on a rooftop that God shows no partiality (Acts 10), and Paul warns us not to let anyone judge us over food or drink (Colossians 2:16-17). The shadow has given way to the substance. Yet the abiding word still rings: "Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). So we come to this chapter not to rebuild the menu, but to recover the heart behind it, a God who calls His people to be visibly, joyfully, wholly His.

Group Discussion: Israel's holiness was meant to be visible to the watching nations, woven into the most ordinary parts of daily life. In what concrete, everyday ways should the holiness of God's people be visible to the world around us today?

Personal Reflection: Leviticus 11 left no part of life off-limits to God, not even the dinner table. Where in your own daily routine have you quietly assumed God has no claim, and what would change if you handed Him that area this week?

Read Leviticus 11:1–47

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?

7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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.
10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Mark 7:18–19, where Jesus declares all foods clean and locates true defilement in the heart; Acts 10:9–16, Peter's vision teaching that God has cleansed what He once called common; Colossians 2:16–17, foods and feasts as shadows whose substance belongs to Christ; 1 Peter 1:15–16, the abiding call to be holy because God is holy; 1 Timothy 4:3–5, every creature of God received with thanksgiving and sanctified by the word and prayer.

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com