

Table Rules

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Leviticus 11:1-19, 46-47

Ok. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: 'What on earth is the pastor going to say about this passage?' It's a fair question. This is a strange part of the Bible that we are dealing with tonight. It's a part that most of us know about, but don't pay much attention. It's a part that seems to have little or no real life application. It's a part of the Bible that most of us think has simply been rendered meaningless by the New Testament. After all, we know that Jesus said that it was what comes out of a person's mouth that made her unclean, not what she eats. We also know the story of Peter's vision on the rooftop in Acts 10. We know how God told Peter in that vision that unclean food was now OK for him to eat. For most of us, that's the point where everything changes. We don't have to worry about Leviticus 11 anymore. Because of Acts 10 the meat counter at D&W is wide open to us. However, while it is certainly true that these foods are clean for us now, while it is certainly true that the laws of Leviticus 11 aren't binding to us anymore, it is wrong to think that they have nothing to say to us. The law of the Old Testament has been fulfilled, not destroyed. These laws have been fulfilled not removed. When we read them we can still learn something about who God is and what it means to follow him.

So what can we learn? What on earth is God up to when he prescribes all these really strange do's and don'ts for the Israelite dinner table? Well, the short answer is, God makes Israelite meals such a hassle because food is spiritual stuff. What we eat and how we eat are part of our spiritual expression. They reflect our spiritual values. What we eat and how we eat are part of what spiritually shapes us. They form our spiritual values. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has written heavily on this subject. In her work she has described mealtimes as a kind of language. "The taking of food has a social component as well as a biological one." Meals send messages. She even says that meals can be a kind of poetry. In a poem the poet uses the medium of words to capture some truth about life and the universe and God. Thoughts and feelings and values are expressed through words on a page. Douglas says we can express some of the same universal thoughts and feelings and values with the arrangement of our food. Meals send spiritual messages.

OK, some of you are thinking, Peter you've lost me. Meals as spiritual messages? This is pretty weird. But just bear with me here. There are all sorts of homey, real life examples which illustrate the truth of food spirituality. In the dating realm, when a guy is interested in a girl and wants to get to know her better, he will often ask her to share some sort of food with him, he asks her out to eat and drink. And depending on the kind of eating he suggests, a different message is sent. Suppose he asks her to come have a cup of coffee with him after class, what's the message? The message is 'I'd like to get to know you better, let's have a friendly conversation.' He could offer instead that the two of them go out for lunch. Slightly higher level of interest and risk involved now. He could ask her out to dinner; a more formal offer and now the stakes are higher still. We could go still higher up the commitment ladder: He could ask her over to his place and offer to cook her dinner. Or finally, la piece de resistance, he could ask her over to dinner at his childhood home to eat his Mom's cooking and meet the parents. Maximum risk. Maximum interest. The implied message being, I'm thinking of you as marriage material. Meals sends messages. They communicate values. That's why many psychologists will say that it is so

important for families to eat together. There is something in the meal that forms and strengthens the family. The family meal has a kind of social and even spiritual power. Even the way we set up a typical dinner sends a sort of spiritual message. When we eat we must finish our main course and our veggies and our potatoes before we can have dessert. You don't start a meal with pie and ice cream and then move on to the green beans. It's not done! When you think about it isn't there a kind of value communicated through this meal structure? Something about rewards coming only after the sacrifice. Something about work coming before pleasure. Food is spiritual. Meals send messages. You are what you eat, and you are how you eat.

God knows how we are formed. He knows how food spiritually affects people, and that is why he gives these regulations to the people of Israel. These food rules are not arbitrary, they send messages to the people about who they are, about who God is, and about what really matters in this world. These rules communicate God's values. There are three values being communicated in all the rules of Leviticus 11.

The first value is the value of order. In these strict food rules God is communicating to them that He is a God of order and not chaos. In these verses God gives regulations about the eating of 3 different kinds of creature: Creatures of the land, creatures of the air and creatures of the water. Each of these realms - Land, sea and air - each have a proper kind of creature associated with it. Leviticus assumes that there is a normal way for a sea animal to look, there is a normal way for a land animal to look, and there is a normal way for a flying animal to look. Animals that fit that normal order are proper for eating. Animals that deviate from the norm are unclean. A normal fish has fins and scales, says verse nine. Any fish that doesn't have fins and scales - lobsters, crabs, turtles, dolphin, and sharks - all these are unclean. They deviate from good order. A normal land animal has a cloven hoof and chews its cud. Any animal that doesn't have both these features deviates from good order and is therefore unclean. A normal bird has wings and walks on two legs - four legged insects that deviate from that good order are unclean, but grasshoppers and locusts that seem to hop in their two big back legs, these are close enough to the proper order to be permitted. For each of the three realms of creatures then there was a proper way of being and the Israelites were only to eat the animals that fit the proper order.

So what message was communicated here? The Israelites learned that there was also a proper order for their lives. Human beings couldn't live their life chaotically, in any old way they wanted, there was a proper way for things to go. There was one path, there was one way, and there was an order. Every time an Israelite family sat down to eat these properly ordered animals, they got the message that they were to live properly ordered lives.

Second. These food rules communicated the need for purity and holiness. Notice that in verses 29-31 and in verse 41, animals that move along the ground are forbidden. Snakes and worms and lizards and rats and mice. Creepy crawly things may not be eaten. Why not? Because they drag themselves in the dust and dirt. They are dirty and impure and literally unclean. The holy people of God ought not to eat such filthy things! Same problem with pigs. Not only are pigs disordered because they don't chew their cud, they are also filthy animals which roll in the dirt. They are just plain "*vies*". And the pure people of God should not eat anything so dirty and corrupt. So every time the Israelites looked at their dinner plates and saw there only animals that kept themselves above the ground, that kept themselves relatively clean, they would receive the message that they were called to serve a righteous God by living righteous lives. The meal itself was sending the message of verse 45 - be holy for I am holy.

Third. The food rules communicated to them that life was precious to God. Life was a precious gift. You will notice that the list of forbidden birds in verses 13-18 has a common

element. All of them are birds of prey or carrion. They eat dead meat and meat with the blood still in it. Most of you know that this was a huge taboo for Israelites. You were never to eat meat that hadn't been drained of the life blood of the creature. To eat meat with the blood still in it was deeply offensive. Verses 13-18 extend this practice to forbidding the eating of animals that ate meat with the blood still in it. Why was the eating of blood such a big deal? Well in the words of Leviticus 17:14, it's because "the life of a creature is in its blood." The life is in the blood. The ancients thought of blood as the power of life, the gift of life was in this red fluid and so this red fluid was special and was to be treated with the utmost respect. To disrespect blood, to spill it without cause, and especially to eat it, was to disrespect life. It was to treat life with contempt and if there is one thing precious to God it is the gift of life. When the Israelites spent all this extra time butchering their meat in a specific kosher way, when they refused to eat these animals that ate other creature's blood, they were getting the message life is special, life is precious, and life must be protected.

These were not arbitrary rules God gave to Israel, they were a powerful set of rituals that taught them who they were. Every time they sat down to dinner they learned that they weren't like the other nations. They were different. They were special. They were set aside by God to be people of holiness, purity and life, people whose existence was totally devoted to God.

These food rules no longer apply to us. We don't have to worry about unclean food anymore. But that doesn't mean that God has forgotten the spiritual power of food. We Christians have our own special meal with a message. We have the food we share right here. What happens at this table fulfills the laws of Leviticus 11. In some ways the message of our meal here is the same as the old ones: We learn here that we are called to be Holy, that we are called to purity, that God is a God who loves and protects life, who loves it enough to send his son to die for it. Here we remember that we too are set aside by God as a Holy nation, a royal priesthood, a chosen people. In some way the message is the same.

But in other ways it's different, it's deeper and better. Leviticus 11 is fulfilled here. The Lord's Supper speaks a better word than the words of Leviticus 11. In the meal of Leviticus, you have to prove your cleanliness. You earn your cleanliness by following the rules and keeping yourself clean and before God and remain acceptable. But here at this table, cleanliness isn't something you prove. You come to this table unclean and you pray for Christ to make you whole. Here, cleanliness is a gift given to people with empty hands and humble hearts. We don't earn our acceptance here; we receive it as a gift.

The meal of Leviticus also has a defensive posture. These laws amount to a warning to keep yourself away from an unclean world. Stay away from the abnormal people. Avoid the broken places and the unclean folk. Avoid contact with these people and places could corrupt you. If these people and things touched you they would corrupt you. The Spirit of the meal was careful, inward, and protective. The table of the Lord's Supper has a different posture. This is the table of the one who conquered sin and death. This is the table of the one whose resurrection routed the forces of evil. We are no longer afraid of the brokenness out there, we go face to face with the world's brokenness. At this table we are sent forth into the world to make disciples of all nations. We go and boldly shine God's light in unclean places. In his ministry Jesus did all sorts of things that by the standard of Leviticus would have made him unclean. He touched a woman with a flow of blood - unclean. He healed lepers - unclean. He touched dead bodies to heal them - unclean. He accepted water from a Samaritan woman - unclean. But the touch of these people didn't corrupt Jesus, Jesus' touch healed these people! Jesus' touch made them clean! He reversed the polarity of cleanliness! Now when good touches evil, it is evil that shrinks

back, it is evil that is 'infected' by the good! Of course Evil is strong and dangerous. And we have to guard against it. We fight it. But we are not afraid of it. We can go into a broken world with confidence. Through grace and sacrifice, we can touch the world's broken places with the power to heal. We can be in unclean places and transform them. It's a great empowering message. And it's something we learn right here. You can learn a lot at dinner.

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