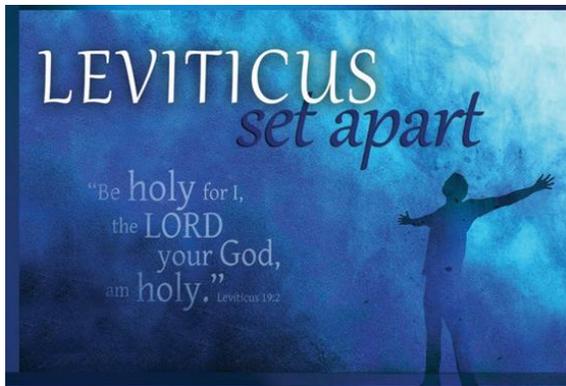


Be Holy for I AM Holy Series
Making Life-Giving Distinctions

Leviticus 11:1-25, 44-47
Old Testament Sermon Series on Leviticus
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
September 27, 2015

TEXTS: Leviticus 11:1-25, 44-47

We continue this morning in our fall series on the Book of Leviticus, and we look at a subject this morning that on first reading may seem slightly obscure. Yet, like any great relationship,



sometimes when we don't at first understand what our spouse is saying, a close friend is saying, or at times what the Lord is saying, when we listen carefully, we discover that the relationship gets deeper and there is much to share. In Leviticus, what we been emphasizing is about hearing God's call to us. The whole Book of Leviticus is a conversation. God is speaking to His people from the tent of meeting. The call of God, the voice of God,

throughout Leviticus, repeated eight different times, is a calling to “be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” This is the call of Leviticus, and we are to reflect the holiness of belonging to God in every area of our lives.

I want to begin the sermon this morning with a simple thesis: eating is a religious act. Let me give you an easy example. If you go to Greece in the springtime and you see an entire community roasting a lamb on a spit and people gathering together and feasting on that lamb, and you ask someone, “What is going on here?” you would receive an easy explanation. You would hear: “We are roasting the lamb and remembering Jesus Christ the Lamb of God slain for our sins, and we are feasting together as a community.” That's an easy one. Would that be terribly difficult understand? Let me give you one that is maybe a slightly more difficult. This happened to me on Friday. I stopped into a local grocery store in Cincinnati, and I was checking out of the grocery store, getting ready to eat what I had purchased, when I saw on the wall of the grocery store in large letters: “Change the world every time you gather around the table.” I looked at my apples, and I thought: “Okay, change the world every time you gather around the table. That's a high claim. That means eating is something significant, a religious act.” Let me give you another example. Most of the world looks at our society and says Americans are over-

consumers. For some of us, overconsumption is eating too much because we are looking for religious peace or comfort from what we are eating. Sometimes we overeat because we can afford to, and that is an expression of religious value.

Eating is a religious act, and so it is in the Bible. In ancient Israel, eating is a religious act that promotes a pattern of holy living in daily life and sets apart the community of faith. As we read through the list of prohibited and permitted animals in Israel's diet, I want to tell you the key to this whole chapter. It is really at the end of the chapter which tells us the reason for this portion of God's Word. Let me be clear about that. The reason for these dietary laws is expressed concretely as an expression of practical holiness in Israel's life. God tells us three times in Leviticus 11:44 that the rationale for these dietary laws is a reflection that:

"I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy."

The sacrificial system in Leviticus 1-7 must be viewed as a whole system of holiness, a system of worship that is based in blood atonement leading to thanksgiving, and then that thanksgiving expressing itself in the life of the community and fellowship. That same pattern of worship is at stake in the dietary laws. Atonement is made through blood, and that is why God's people are commanded to refrain from and respect the blood. Its purpose is for making atonement. God's people are to eat in a way that reflects gratitude and thanksgiving, and the result of eating with gratitude and thanksgiving is a fellowship, a defined community of faith, that is visible around the table. As obscure as this list of animals may seem, there is something very profound going on here. Perhaps some of you are already thinking of your brunch plans, and you are thinking you can't wait for the all-you-can-eat buffet, and there's going to be bacon there. You are so glad you are in the New Covenant and none of this applies to you. But let me stress that actually what we are taught in Leviticus 11 carries over in its principal ideas even within the New Covenant, as we will see. And, by the way, God's people were instructed to do this and keep these commands for 1500 years, so I think we can give a Sunday to it.

It is also of interest that in traditional Jewish communities to this day, this is one of the first passages taught to children, and it is one of the last for most Christians. So, we want to look at these permitted animals and prohibited animals, and I want you to see the underlying rationale to this whole system. The sacrificial system, as we studied in Leviticus 1-7, again has that pattern of blood atonement, thanksgiving, and fellowship, and that same rhythm of worship in daily worship is reflected in the dietary laws of which Chapter 11 forms a critical piece.

When we look at Leviticus 11, we see that the chapter is divided into three spheres of animal life: spheres of land, sea, and sky. Those who are more familiar with the Bible should recognize immediately this taxonomy. This is not the great tree of life with its branches that you might

see at a natural history museum. This is the vision of life that is expressed by the creative design of the Lord God Almighty. Organization of the world and the life within the world in spheres of land, sea, and sky or heaven, reflects what we see in Genesis 1, and this is a reflection of the will and design of God as our Creator. We look at each sphere of these animals and there is something very fundamental and basic that guides the distinction between permitted animals and ones prohibited to eat. The first ones we want to look at are land animals. We are given two criteria of all the land animals you may eat. You may eat of any animal that has a divided hoof and chews the cud. Those of us who have not grown up around animal husbandry may be unfamiliar with what chewing the cud is. I am not going to demonstrate it, but I am going to describe it. Chewing the cud is the feeding activity of herbivorous ruminants, animals who eat grass or plant life. They eat them; they go into their stomachs; they regurgitate them; they eat them little bit more; and then they swallow them again. A ruminating animal chews its food, grains and plant life, completely, and these are permitted animals. The permitted animals also have a divided hoof. Why does God care about the divided hoof? The contrast is that animals that have divided hooves are domesticated animals. The other type of movement that you can have are creatures that have a paw, and that's the difference. Permitted animals are animals that eat grass and walk in a way that is domesticated, and prohibited animals are predators and wild animals that are eating and devouring the meat of other creatures. That is the basic underlying rationale, so allowed animals are animals like ox, sheep, goats, and the others listed in Deuteronomy 14, the parallel passage. Prohibited animals are animals that have paws and eat their food by a predatory manner of collecting their food. Why would God care about this? He teaches us about this, and it is the same basic underlying rationale in each sphere. That is the rationale on land; that is the rationale in the sea.

We are told that of all the creatures living in the water of the seas and streams, we can eat every kind that has fins and scales. This again is the pattern of movement of domesticated type of creatures living in the seas, and these are creatures that are not predatory or scavengers. Crustaceans were viewed in the ancient world as eating the flesh of other carrion or dead creatures or scavengers along the sea floor. The Lord says that anything living in the water that does not have fins and scales is to be regarded as unclean. So creatures that are excluded are scavengers or predators, and creatures that are allowed are perceived as able to be domesticated. It is the same rationale when we look at those in the sky or the heavens. These are the birds you are to regard as unclean. This is not an anti-bird statement, because birds are God's idea. God could have made just one type of creature on land, in the sea, or the sky, but our God has an incredible capacity for creativity. Out of His own good pleasure, He fills these spheres with a tremendous variety of creatures, and yet in the sphere of the birds, the same rationale is at play. The prohibited birds are all birds that are perceived as either birds of prey or birds that are eating carrion or dead creatures: four types of falcons, four types of vultures,

six types of owls, and the raven are all prohibited. God does not specify the permitted, but it is the opposite case that is allowed. In ancient Israel, the animals that are allowed are the animals that are domesticated and typically feed on grain, like hens, quails, domestic geese, and ducks.

So what's going on here? I hope you see that what is really being communicated by the Lord is that permitted creatures are creatures that are domesticated, and prohibited are creatures of prey. Throughout commentary tradition on the Bible, many scholars, over many centuries, have wondered about the underlying basis for prohibited and permitted creatures. Some of the earliest Bible commentaries that we have are actually on Leviticus 11, and yet one traditional conservative answer to what the criteria is for these distinctions is that this list is just completely arbitrary, and it is just like a test: God is just saying, "Here is a list, just do it because I said so." That really isn't the character of our God. God doesn't just say. "Just do it because I said so." God does things with motivation, intention, and design. I think we can reject the *arbitrary* view of the prohibited and permitted animals. Others have sought for rationale of permitted and prohibited creatures on what is sometimes called the *hygiene* view. Some have said that God must prohibit these things because the prohibited animals carry disease or they're not healthy. There are some notable names associated with the hygiene view. Maimonides and William Albright had the view that these prohibited creatures were prohibited because of health reasons. But this view really flounders on the fact that Leviticus 11 does not describe in general: "Don't eat dangerous things." There is no mention, for example, of poisonous dart frogs. If God had the design to say, "Let Me just tell you what is dangerous out there," He would have included other things. He would have included some dangerous plants. So that is not really a sufficient basis. What is the rationale? It is what we have already intimated. It is that Leviticus 11, in the end, says that these laws are designed to set apart a holy people for God, unto God, and that these laws are for holiness. The laws in Leviticus 11, and the laws that God describes for our patterns of eating, are designed so that we would reflect this holy status in the Lord's sight. God says in Leviticus 20:24 that He gives us these commands with specific reference of making distinction between clean and unclean, or pure and impure animals, in our diet because the Lord says:

"I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from the nations."

The setting apart from the nations creates Israel as a distinct and separate people in the world. When you go by an ethnic restaurant, you see that a distinct diet often defines a people, and so it is the case in ancient Israel. It is not set apart by spice preference; it is not set apart by cooking style. Israel is set apart fundamentally by their humaneness or their humanness in how they eat. A key element of Israel's dietary law system is the prohibition against blood consumption. In Leviticus 17:11, the Lord says:

"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make

atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, 'No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood.'"

Israel is commanded to take special care not to eat the blood of animals. Blood is drained carefully because God reserves atonement through blood. Jacob Milgrom says:

"Life is inviolable; it may not be treated lightly. Mankind has a right to nourishment, not to life. Hence the blood, the symbol of life, must be drained, returned to God."

Israel is commanded not to eat the blood, and this is the way that differentiates them from the nations. Israel is commanded to slaughter animals in a ritual manner that gives a painless slaughter of the animals, again differentiating Israel from the nations.

Another key element is this list of permitted and prohibited animals is allowing domesticated creatures and keeping us back from eating creatures that eat by either scavenging or by prey. Baruch Levine says:

"A socioreligious intent clearly underlies the dietary classification system. Ideally, humankind should be sustained by the produce of the earth. When, instead, other living creatures are used as food, as is permitted, such use should be restricted to living creatures that sustain themselves with what grows on the earth and that do not prey on other living creatures or attack man. In eating the substance of other living creatures, care must be taken not to eat their 'life', which is to say their blood. . . . Eating blood is like shedding blood. By such avoidance, Israelites are kept from bestiality; their humaneness is enhanced. The permitted animals are herbivorous ruminants, whereas virtually all forbidden birds are carnivorous creatures of prey.

"In a positive sense, the laws of the Torah make the observance of a dietary regimen essential to the achievement of the collective humaneness of the people of Israel. Underlying all the dietary regulations is a broad objective to maintain a distance between the Israelites and their neighbors, so that the former do not go astray after pagan religions."

Some of you are thinking you still don't know what this has to do with you. It actually has a lot to do with all of us, because how we eat is a religious act. If you eat and you overconsume, and you seek comfort for your soul in what you're eating, you are trying to fill yourself with something that God is trying to provide for you. We live in the wealthiest nation on the planet, and yet we have one of the highest rates of depression on the planet. One of the ways we try to fill the void that we have for God is by eating, over-eating. Sometimes we try to fill that void in a very strange way, by under-eating, because we have absorbed the idolatry of our society that says you are how you look. So we under eat, because we have partaken of the idolatry around

us that would define our worth by our appearance. Others of us just eat and gulp down food without even pausing to say thanks. Eating is a religious act. It's a religious act to pause and thank God for His provision. It is a religious act when we eat to thank God for the atonement that He has made through blood, to thank Him for His provision, and to allow eating together to define the community of faith in fellowship.

Eating is a religious act that reflects our humanness or humanity back to God. It moves away from eating just by instinct or appetite, and instead, it creates eating to reflect the pattern of discrimination and judgment and thanksgiving back to God. The purpose of the dietary system in the Old Testament is to teach the Israelites a reverence for life by reducing the choice of animals to be eaten to just a few, by commanding the slaughter of those few by the most humane way, and by prohibiting the ingestion of blood and mandating its use on the altar. The *Letter of Aristeas* is the one of the earliest commentaries on the Bible. It is from about 200 B.C., and it is a long document that treats a number of different subjects. In a large central section of this ancient document, the writer reflects on the meaning of the dietary laws, and he reflects the very same thing that we are trying to see here this morning. In this document, the writer says:

“. . . Moses drew up his laws with such exceeding care. All these ordinances were made for the sake of righteousness to aid the quest for virtue and the perfecting of character. For all the birds that we use are tame and distinguished by their cleanliness, feeding on various kinds of grain . . . , such as for instance pigeons, turtle doves, locusts, partridges, geese also, and all other birds of this class.

“But the birds which are forbidden you will find to be wild and carnivorous, tyrannizing over the others by the strength which they possess, and cruelly obtaining food by preying on the tame birds enumerated above and not only so, but they seize lambs and kids, and injure human beings too, whether dead or alive.”

An ancient reader who has lived within this system says: “The point of it is really our humanity.” That is what is at stake. I want you to think that eating is a religious act that is to reflect God's holiness. It is a religious act to give thanks to God. It is a religious act that curtails our rapacious appetite. It is a religious act that curtails our greed. It is a religious act that enables us to reflect fellowship and community with one another. It is an interesting fact that archaeologists try to discover how you can tell if you have found an ancient Israelite settlement. Usually when you dig up an ancient house or village, you see the ruins of homes. Very rarely do you see words or an inscription that says this house belonged to, for example, Simeon. You just don't have that. So archaeologists often wonder how they can tell if they have found an Israelite settlement, or not. The most defining characteristic of knowing that you have found an Israelite village in antiquity is by the absence of one significant item: the absence of pig bones. Isn't that

interesting? How do I know I've got an Israelite house? No pig bones. That means that in antiquity, Israel was distinguished in this way. When they excavate Philistine settlements on the coast, there is an abundance of pig bones. Israel obeyed these laws as a way of defining their identity and set-apartness from the nations.

We see this vividly in Daniel 1. You will recall that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and besieged it. The Lord gave the king of Judah into his hand. The king commanded his chief eunuch Ashpenaz to bring some of the royal family and of the nobility and young men without blemish, handsome, and skilled in wisdom, and he brought them to the king's palace to learn the literature and language of the Chaldeans. We read in Daniel 1:5:

“The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king.”

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were among them. They were given new names, Babylonian names, in Daniel 1:6:

“Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.”

These young men were in a new place, learning a new language, a new course of study, and given new names. They felt the freedom under God's sovereignty, that God had moved them to all of these new things, and they had to decide in one way to hold on to their identity as God's people, to hold on to their relationship with God. We will take a new name; we will take a new place; we will learn a new language; we will learn a new course of study; but we are not going to eat new foods. In Daniel 1:8, we read:

“But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank.”

Daniel and his companions decide to keep the dietary laws because their identity as God's people in the rhythm of daily life was at stake. God blesses and honors Daniel and his companions, and they flourish and prosper despite the king's command. We read that Daniel remained in the king's service until the first year of Cyrus, decades in the service of the Babylonian king. Yet the daily devotion that we see in Daniel, as we read the Book of Daniel, is Daniel's commitment to daily prayer and his commitment to eating what God said they could eat. Eating is a religious act.

When we turn to the New Covenant, we see that Christ changes aspects of the dietary laws, and this should tell us something important. The Old Testament law changes only when Christ explicitly changes it. Sometimes Christians have in mind that the Old Testament is completely

irrelevant to us unless Christ says it is. I think the other way around this is more accurate, that the Old Testament law carries forward unless Jesus has explicitly changed it. We see that eating is a religious act; eating defines the community of faith; and we see that the change in the New Covenant is along these lines and not separate from them. In Acts 10, when Jesus appears to Peter in a vision, He speaks to him from heaven as a sheet comes down filled with all different kinds of creatures. The voice from heaven tells Peter in Acts 10:13:

“Get up, Peter; kill and eat.”

Peter says in Acts 10:14:

“By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.”

Peter had been keeping the Levitical laws as his ancestors had for centuries, and Jesus says in Acts 10:15:

“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

God was now declaring that all foods are clean. Why are they clean? They are clean precisely because Cornelius and his companions, Gentiles, are coming in, and Jesus says the foods are clean now. You can eat different types of foods, but not for the purpose of rejecting Scripture, but for the purpose of defining and enabling this fellowship around a shared table. The apostle Paul says this as well in Romans 14, writing to congregations of Jews and Gentiles. He says in Romans 14:14:

“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.”

The possibility of shared fellowship across Jews and Gentiles is made possible, but eating remains a religious act in the New Testament. It doesn't stop being a religious act. It doesn't stop reflecting our humanness. God doesn't say all foods are permitted now, eat however much you want, gorge yourself at the expense of others, starve yourselves for vanity, consume whatever you want with hearts of ingratitude, promote greed within yourself. That is not at all part of the New Covenant. Permitted foods are allowed because the definition of the community of faith includes the nations now, and so you can have bacon for brunch. It is one of the blessings. We can have a hog roast, but eating remains a religious act.

Let me apply this in three ways. Number one: Eating is a religious act that is to **free us from idolatry**. We can very easily make food into an idol. We can worship food by thinking that it is what we eat or how we eat it, or if we just had the right organic suppliers and growers and everything, we would change the world. We don't need Jesus Christ or the Gospel. That is a mistake. That is making an idol out of food. We can make an idol out of food by over eating, eating more than we need because we are seeking from food something that only Christ can

give. We can make an idol out of food by under-eating or starving ourselves. We have a great crisis in our country with anorexia and bulimia, which is another way of making an idol out of food, connected with our culture of vanity. What we eat matters to God and frees us from idolatry.

Number two: Eating is a religious act that **opens up table fellowship with other believers**. It is a religious act to eat together as brothers and sisters in Christ. It is a religious act to invite someone into your home and extend hospitality around the table. Eating is a religious act at the center of Christian faith. It is a celebration of communion. It is a religious act that defines and displays participation in the family of God.

Number three. Eating is a religious act that **should be permeated with thanksgiving**. When we know that blood has been shed for our forgiveness, we respond with thanksgiving. It is a religious act to pause and pray before you eat. For some of you, this may be the first act of your recovered humanity in Christ, to pause before you eat and pray. Let me give you three short, world-changing moments in my life around prayer before a meal. The first was with our dear brother Roman Walton. If you have never prayed with Roman Walton, you have missed something wonderful. I remember meeting with a group of men from Kenwood in a restaurant over breakfast. Roman was there, and someone asked Roman to pray for the breakfast. As he prayed for our meal, his last line of the prayer was: "Lord, use this food to strengthen our resolve to serve You." I couldn't believe what I had heard. I have been praying that ever since. What a vision of what it means to eat something: "Lord, thank You for this food that I am about to eat." Implied within that is deep gratitude for the atoning work of Jesus Christ for my forgiveness, and not only has He forgiven me my sins, but He has actually given me breakfast. I am going to eat this meal, and as I take in this food before I eat it, I am going to say: "Oh, Lord, use this food to strengthened my resolve to serve You." I want you to do that. I want you to see what you are eating as God's gift and translate that into energy to make your will stronger in the service of Christ.

Let me give you a second picture of the world-changing power of prayer before a meal. We had an event of medical students, residents, physicians, and young adults. It was a large gathering at the Golden Lamb in Lebanon, a historic place to eat, with a very neat environment. About 40 of us were gathered around large table in a separate room. We were getting ready to eat, and before we ate, I just stood up and prayed for the meal. I thanked God for the food that we were about to eat. As we were praying, I could hear people walking around us, placing little plates on the table. I was overwhelmed that Jesus had paid for my sins, forgiven me, given me new life, and not only had He done all that, but He put me in this restaurant, and I was getting ready to eat food that I had nothing to do with preparing. The words of Christ came to my mind: "The

Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many.” I just thought, who am I getting ready to eat this great meal, and not only that, but someone has cooked it for me. Not only that, they are bringing it out to me. Not only that, while I am praying, they are keeping a lid on it to keep it warm. So, I just prayed and I thanked God for all the people that were serving, made the meal, and brought it to us. We begin to eat, and about 25 minutes into the meal, one of the servers came up to me and tapped me on the shoulder. She said, “Can I speak to you for a minute?” She had a note of urgency in her voice, and I thought someone’s meal was ill-prepared, or someone has hair in their chicken, or something is going wrong with this meal. She pulled me aside and looked right at me, and as she started to speak, she started crying. I thought: “This is really bad!” But she looked me and said, “I’ve been working here for 15 years, and I’ve never heard anyone stand up publicly and thank God for all of the people who are serving in the kitchen.” She just said, “Thank you.” That is all she wanted to say. That will change the world, how you approach the table.

One last illustration and then I’m finished. The last illustration is from a woman named Rosaria Butterfield, whom I really want you to get to know in the next couple of weeks. I mentioned her in a previous sermon. She was a tenured English professor at Syracuse University. She became a Christian, and her testimony is very powerful. She is a very powerful voice in the contemporary discussion about sexuality. Her first meal in a Christian home as a non-Christian was in the home of a pastor and his wife, Ken and Floy. This woman, apart from Christ at the time, responded to an invitation and came to this home, ate, and talked about Christ, an initial conversation, for many hours. She wrote later about what had impressed her the most about that first night:

“The most memorable part of this meal was Ken’s prayer before the meal. I had never heard anyone pray to God as if God cared, as if God listened, and as if God answered. It was not a pretentious prayer. It was a private and honest utterance, and I felt as though I was treading on something real, something sincere, something important.”

Eating is a religious act. All foods are permitted in the New Covenant, and yet God's design to restore to us our humaneness, our humanity, and to use eating to define table fellowship within the family of God remains. So, as you eat, partake, and ask that the food would strengthen your resolve to serve God. As you eat, pray for those who prepared it, and pray for those seated round you in restaurants, and open your home and life to table fellowship with believers and unbelievers that the Word of Christ might dwell within us.

Amen.