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Q&A#133 Clean and Unclean Animals

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Today's question: "What should we make of the distinction between clean and unclean animals? Is there some deeper reason that some animals are considered clean and others unclean?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what should we make of the distinction between clean and unclean animals? Is there some deeper reason that some animals are considered clean and others unclean? Many theories have been put forward for this. Some people have argued that it's to do with health reasons, that God is prescribing a healthy diet for his people so that they'll be able to eat well.

I just don't think that holds much water. Others have suggested that the clean animals are herbivores. There are two criteria by which those animals are to be discerned, chewing the cud and having split hooves.

Those allow animals to walk to different sorts of terrain, grazing animals. It's also a means by which animals that have to digest grass and plants, that they will be ruminants. Those two criteria together enable you to identify the and the common feature of those animals is that they are herbivores.

Now I think there may be something to that, but I don't think that's the primary reason. Another thing that we should notice is that there are clean and unclean animals very early on in the biblical text. In chapter 7 of the book of Genesis, we already have clean and unclean animals.

Then the Lord said to Noah, come into the ark, you and all your household, because I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation. You shall take with you seven each of every clean animal, a male and his female, two each of animals that are unclean, a male and his female. So already at that point, we have clean and unclean animals.

Later on, after the flood occurs, there is a statement given concerning the eating of animals. This is the first law concerning what mankind should and shouldn't eat in the animal realm. Before this, many presumed that human beings would have been that they would have just been vegetarian.

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. So earlier on in the book of Genesis, they are given all the fruits and all the trees and all of that is their food.

Here, that seems to be extended to include animals and moving things. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is its blood. Surely for your lifeblood, I will require a reckoning from the hand of every beast.

I will require it and from the hand of man. So there is an extension of mankind's right to eat, to include all the animals. And at this point, this is also an extension of man's dominion, his rule over the animals that God has given the animals into the hand of humanity.

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand.

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. So there's an extension of humanity's right to eat. That original gift of food was held in common with the other animals.

And it was something that gave man the right to eat of all the herbs, all the trees, other things like that. But now it seems to be extended further and includes the animals now. And this is associated with mankind's rule over the animals, that the dread and the fear of man will be placed into the animals.

So there are developments over time in man's rule of the animals. When we get to the book of Leviticus, we see a further development in the restrictions that are given in what should and should not be eaten. And here we have in chapter 11, a lengthy description of certain animals that should and shouldn't be eaten and criteria by which those can be determined.

Most particularly, the division between animals that have divided hooves and those that don't, and those that chew the cud and those that don't. Now there are certain animals that have one of those criteria but not the other. And in those cases, they're ruled out.

So for instance, the pig is ruled out as an animal. Or the camel, because it chews the cud but does not have cloven hooves, is unclean to you. And the swine, though it divides the hoof, having cloven hooves, yet it does not chew the cud, it's unclean to you.

So these are animals that are divided according to these two criteria. In the sea, it has to do with scales particularly. Then there's flying insects that creep on all fours.

Those are an abomination. But everyone that creeps, everyone that hops or leaps on the earth, they can eat. So they can eat crickets and grasshoppers and locusts.

They can't, when it comes to birds, they're not supposed to eat vulture, eagle, buzzard, kite, falcon, raven, ostrich, these sorts of birds. Carrion vulture, other creatures like that. Now these seem to be creatures, the birds maybe seem to be creatures associated with the night.

That's one suggestion. Carrion birds, maybe that's another feature of it, that they're associated with carcasses. Other ways in which they might be distinguished, they could be, the carrion and the night birds, I think is probably the main feature of those.

And then there are other creatures that they're not supposed to eat that creep on the earth. Anything that creeps on the earth, like the mole or the mouse, the large lizard, the gecko, the monitor lizard, the sand reptile, the sand lizard, the chameleon, all of these are unclean. But looking through this chapter, it's important to remember that many of these words are difficult to translate, so we may not know exactly what these animals were.

We do know the criteria though, and so there's concern about animals that are associated with crawling on their bellies on the earth. Whatever crawls on its belly, whatever goes on all fours, or whatever has many feet among all creeping things that creep on the earth, these you shall not eat for they are an abomination. So all of those animals have particular associations.

How do we interpret this? I think one of the most helpful clues that I've found has been in the work of James Jordan when he talks about the way that these chapters follow the pattern of the book of Genesis, or the pattern of the creation narrative in Genesis, and

then the fall. So earlier on you have the setting up of the tabernacle, and you have the appointment of the priests within the tabernacle, and then you have a fall type event with Nadab and Abihu bringing in strange fire into the tabernacle. And after this you have these laws concerning cleanness.

Now those laws would seem, he argues, to correspond with the judgments that are declared afterwards. So first of all you have the judgment on the serpent, the serpent that is made to crawl on his, creep on his belly, and then you have the judgment on the which is associated with childbirth. And so the next law is the ritual concerning childbirth.

And then the next one is the judgment upon the man, the association of the skin and the sweat and these sorts of things. And then the next judgment is leprosy, which is a skin disease. And then there's expulsion from the garden and skins to dress them with, and then there's the leprous garments and the leprous house from which you must depart.

So there seems to be some sort of general theme there. And then when we have chapter 16 after all of this, the question is how can you enter back in to God's presence after this fall has occurred. So these are requirements to exist in the presence of God, principles of cleanness that do not seem to apply outside of the presence of God.

So there's nothing wrong with eating unclean animals before Israel was brought into this relationship with God. They were eating unclean animals presumably in Egypt and that was not in itself a sin. There are certain things that they would not be supposed to eat.

They would not be supposed to, they were not supposed to eat blood with the food. And give a moment to think about that. Why wouldn't you eat blood with the food? As we look through Genesis, what does blood have an association with? An association with life.

And it's the life of the animal is associated with the blood. It's the most powerful symbol of the life of a creature. When you see blood going out, it's the life going out of someone.

And when they are drained of blood, they're drained of life. So it's a very powerful symbol. Now if you eat the animal with the blood, one of the things you're doing is proclaiming something of your right over that creature's life.

What God does in chapter 9 of Genesis is give the permission to eat animals, both clean and unclean at that point, but under strict criteria. So strict limits that they can't eat it with the blood. If they eat it with the blood, they're declaring something of their right over the life of the animal that exceeds what they've truly been given.

And these laws, one of the things that they do is require the eater to consider the fact that the food is a gift, not something that they have a natural right to. God gives the permission to eat these foods, but permission in a way that makes sure that you remove the blood so that there is a recognition that the animal is not yours. Life is not ultimately

yours to take.

Rather, you've been given permission to eat this. But that restriction is something that testifies to the existence of the permission. And the permission does not go, it's not just a blank check.

You're not just given complete rule over all the creatures. There's a recognition that the animals, their life belongs to God much as ours. And as we treat the animals in a way that recognises that we are not ultimately over them, but they are God's and he has given them to us and we must respect his ownership.

The removal of the blood is one of the ways that that is done. It testifies to the fact that the animal is not ultimately our own. Life is not ultimately ours to take.

And so when we do take an animal's life, we take it by permission only, not as something that we have a right to, that it's something that we can take as we wish. And so I think that's in place for that sort of reason. When you get to these more restrictive commands, they're designed to separate and cause Israel to separate between things, distinguish between things.

They're also designed to separate Israel from other peoples. When you think about the animals that are eaten, it's one of the ways in which animals symbolise things. Israel is symbolised by five particular animals.

They're symbolised by the bull, by the goat, by the sheep, by the pigeon and by the turtle dove. These are the creatures of the sacrificial system. There are other creatures that could be part of Israel's life that were not part of the sacrificial system.

So donkeys or camels or these other sorts of creatures. They're not bad animals, but they're creatures that are distinguished and they don't represent Israel. And so the donkey could represent, the ass could represent someone like Hamel, whose name means ass.

There are other ways in which we see the ass representing someone who's a stranger or foreigner in the land of Israel, someone who's among the people, but is not truly one of them in the fullest sense. So animals represent people. And as their diet is restricted, they distinguish between, learn to distinguish between animals.

And God's diet is even more restricted. God consumes the animals placed upon his altar. The altar is a sort of table.

And so he eats, as it were, five particular animals. Israel can eat more animals. The sacrificial animals are not the sum total of the clean animals.

And then people outside of Israel could eat even more animals. So we see a number of

distinctions being drawn there. Sacrificial animals, clean animals, and then unclean animals.

It seems that clean animals, even beyond the sacrificial animals, were sacrificed by Noah. So sacrificial animals are a smaller subset of what was once a larger category of the sacrificial animals that would have been the clean animals. Now let's think about some of the criteria.

If it's connected with the story of the fall and the judgment, why are the particular criteria that we have, why are we given those ones? The serpent is one that crawls on his belly. He's connected with the dust. He crawls on the dust and he eats the dust.

And so the animals that are to be eaten are the ones that have a distance from the dust. So they have hooves. So they don't come into direct contact with the dust.

Now this is important to consider. If we could, if we're just thinking of them as herbivores, well it raises the question about fish. Fish would eat other fish.

It seems that unless we're distinguishing between land and sea animals, that is not a sufficient criteria to explain. Those are not sufficient criteria to explain. I think the other thing to notice is that the criteria that we are given in the case of the birds and in the case of the land animals, they're associated with connection with the land.

And so the locusts you can eat. Locusts because they hop on the ground. You can eat the animals that chew the cud and the animals that have split hooves because they connect with the ground in a particular way.

And they're not associated with dead things in the same, to the same degree. I think that's part of the significance of them being herbivores. That you're generally not eating animals that are carrion birds, for instance, or animals that are carnivores.

And so you're connected with the land in a more direct way. Maybe part of the point is that you do not, you always are connected to the source of life. You have a recognition that the blood is not yours to take.

That God is the giver of life. And you also, as you're mostly eating herbivores, you're eating animals that have a direct connection with the, that have a direct connection with the land. They're not connected with the dust in the same way as the crawling and creeping animals, but they're connected with the plants.

And as a result, you're not at that greater distance of remove that you'd find in the case of lions and other creatures that are creatures of prey. Maybe that's part of the point. And these distinctions could help to distinguish between different classes of animals and the symbolism associated with them.

Between Israel and the nations, the other nations can be represented by unclean animals, animals associated with different realms. But also it's, much of it comes down to the connection with the judgment upon the ground. So the dust is judged and those creatures that are most directly connected with the dust, mediate that to us.

And so there's a symbolism here that I think is supposed to be instructive. Now I don't think it's primarily about some natural property of these animals that they're less healthy to eat or that they're good for, or that the clean animals are good for some particular purpose, whatever it is. I don't think that's the point.

I think the point is that Israel is supposed to learn something about who owns food. And they're also supposed to learn something about what it means to be a separate people to the Lord. They're supposed to recognize the way in which they're supposed to relate to the dirt, to relate to this realm that has been judged.

If they're going to be a holy people, a distinct people, they have to recognize the judgment that has come upon the earth. And that distinction enables them to be people who are deeply aware of these sorts of things. So if you're practicing kosher regulations, you're someone who's going to be alert to issues of blood and issues of connection with the dirt.

And these sorts of questions will help you to be alert more generally to issues that are highlighted in Genesis chapter 3 and elsewhere. That you become someone who's very connected with the material of food. You know where your food comes from.

And as a result, it gives you a recognition of who God is as the one who owns all these things, who has created these things, who is the master of all life, and that you receive things from his hand and only what he has given to you. You don't have the right to take as you please. And so I think that's part of the point.

I think putting this into the bigger picture, it's one of the ways in which Israel was defined over against the other nations as a holy people. So we already have in Genesis chapter 9 this initial commandment concerning food. This initial recognition that food, life belongs to God.

And you can't just take life as you want. And so even as you do take life of animals, you have to leave this part of it. You can't eat that part of it, that part that most symbolizes life.

That belongs to God. And so it's taboo. And as a result, you have a recognition of what God has given to you, but also that in that particular restriction, that life is not ultimately ours to take as we want.

It's only as we have been given permission. And then these greater restrictions are means by which Israel can be distinguished that God is a God who has a very restrictive

diet. He eats, consumes those five animals of Israel.

And Israel's diet is restricted too. They become more concerned about the sorts of things that they eat, more discriminating. I think that's part of the means by which Israel is being trained to discriminate more generally.

As you reflect upon why it is that you're eating these foods and not others, you learn about what the curse means. You learn about the symbolism of that. So I think that's part of the point.

As human beings, our humanity is very much associated with food. We say, don't wolf that down, or don't eat like a wolf, or don't eat in a rapid fashion, or make a mess as they're eating. All of these things are expressions of undignified and animalistic eating.

And yet in our most animal act, we seek to distinguish ourselves from the animals. So we eat in a way that is refined. We eat in a way that, ideally, that has characteristics of beauty to it.

We set things up, the table, and everything is, we eat together. It's an act of community and fellowship. It's something that has tradition to it.

And there's continuity over time. There's a ritual. And there's a way that we prepare the table and have cutlery and crockery on the table that has a story to it.

We've had this in our family for a couple of generations, for instance. And that is a way in which we humanise our eating. The table is a time of refined, can be a time of refined conversation.

Not in many households, but it can be. It can be a way in which we express what it means to be human beings as distinct from animals. And as we have these restrictions upon our eating, we learn to eat as human beings.

Now, we don't follow those requirements as Christians, but those requirements are things that we should have learnt from. It doesn't mean that we are a people that are separated in quite the same way as Israel was, but we are a people that should recognise where our food comes from. And there are deeper principles here that might apply to the way that we treat animals, the way that we prepare our food.

How do we, do we abstract our food from the source of life? Do we treat our food as something that can be mechanised? Now, I think there might be problems there. And as Christians, we need to ask these sorts of questions. Maybe we need to be more connected with our food and recognise where it has come from and what it means to be given permission to take that life.

That this is a weighty thing. It's not just something we can take for granted. We can't just

treat animals as if they're ours to dispose of.

They're not. Life belongs to God and the life of animals is included in that. And if we take the life of an animal, we cannot take the life in a way that suggests that we have full right to it, that it's ultimately ours to dispose of as we will.

It's not. And so I think humanised eating is part of what's being taught here. That Israel is supposed to learn to distinguish between different types of food and to learn what food means.

What it means to be a people that eat in a way that is good. Now, as you look in the Gospels, I think there's a lot of attention given to eating. Think about how much of Jesus' teaching occurs around meal tables and concerns the etiquette of the meal table.

The meal table is where we first learn manners. It's where we first learn to put others before ourselves. It's where we first learn to act in a respectful way in company.

All these sorts of lessons are learned to the meal table. And Israel is brought before, as it were, the meal table and they're being taught to make certain distinctions. Now, with time, there will be permission for all of us to eat clean and unclean animals.

But we need to have internalised some of the lessons of what it means to eat in a human and a godly way. To be people that do not see animals as merely our possession. As those who recognise the symbolism of animals and as those that eat in a way that recognises the source and gives thanks to the source.

That we, when we eat, generally I hope that you pray before you eat or give thanks for the food that you eat. It's a recognition that this is not all life. Ultimately, it comes from God.

And as we eat our food, we recognise we are not the masters of life, but we receive life from God's hand. We receive life ultimately from dead things. Dead things that we are eating and we are built up in our life.

But life itself ultimately comes from God's hand. And as Israel was given these clean and unclean distinctions, they're being taught about the fall and what it meant to relate to the soil and what it meant to be a people that made those sorts of moral distinctions. I think it's primarily symbolic.

I don't think that there's something in the same way with blood. I don't think that the blood itself, the point is that blood itself in a scientific way is the source of life. I don't think that's the point that's being made.

I think it's more a symbolic point that this life is mapped onto the blood in a very natural way. In the same way as we might think of the person being mapped onto the face, that

you relate to the person in relating to the face. Now, if you're trying to break that down, it might seem a bit strange if you view that scientifically.

But phenomenologically, it's obviously true that we see the human being, person, in the face. In the same way life is seen in the blood. And those sorts of relationships, those symbolic and natural symbolic relationships, I think are part of what's taking place here.

And Israel as it draws those distinctions is mapping theological truths onto the animal world. And through that mapping, it's learning something true about what it means to relate to God. I hope this is of some help.

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