

Lecture 6: Clean and Unclean, the Wilderness, and the Star out of Jacob

Introduction to Biblical Theology · Dr. Thomas Schreiner · The Master's Seminary · 28 minutes

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Before you watch

How do you preach clean and unclean to people who eat ham on Easter? Dr. Schreiner reads the purity laws as symbols that set Israel apart for God, then follows the presence into the wilderness of Numbers: a camp arranged around a tent, a cloud that commands, a generation that fails at the border, and a hired prophet who can only bless. Listen for the star and the scepter, and for the promise no failure could revoke.

The lecture, section by section

1. Symbol, not sin

Clean food, skin disease, bodily discharge: the uncleanness of Leviticus 11 to 15 is not itself sin, but it symbolizes something about the human condition before a holy God, pointing analogically to sin. Morales observes that these chapters sit immediately after Nadab and Abihu's judgment, as if to say: here is the fundamental problem, an unclean people. Even the priests must be ordained and cleansed, because they too are unworthy.

2. Separation, not health

The fundamental purpose of the purity laws is not health but holiness: they segregated Israel from the nations. The proof is that they have been abolished now that Christ has come, which makes no sense if health were the point. And the categories interlock: clean food for sacrifice, clean food, unclean food, answering to priests, ordinary Israelites, and Gentiles, and to tabernacle, camp, and wilderness. God was teaching his people, in their meals and their map, what it means to belong to him and to draw near.

3. A word to preachers: Leviticus in Christ

Schreiner presses the students to preach the Old Testament, and to preach it as Christians, in light of the fulfillment. His plan for Leviticus: the sacrifices of chapters 1 to 7 in one sermon, pointing to the sacrifice of Christ; the ordination of the priests in chapters 8 to 10; the cleanness laws of 11 to 15, pointing to our holiness in Christ; the Day of Atonement of chapter 16 on its own; and 17 to 27 in a few more. Big, faithful sections rather than years in one book: John Piper preached the whole of Job in five sermons. You can never preach the food laws as binding; you preach, with Peter, be holy as I am holy, and explain what has changed in Christ.

4. Leviticus 18 to 27: God-centered holiness, love, and justice

The ethics of the Old Testament is first and foremost God-centered, a point Schreiner takes from Chris Wright: I am the LORD sounds again and again, and the LORD who commands is the LORD who redeemed and who sanctifies. The commands guard pure worship, preserve fellowship, and keep his name from being profaned. And through them, as Hartley notes, run love and justice: honest judgment without favoritism, fair wages, no vengeance, love your neighbor as yourself.

5. Why a covenant with defects? Answering Marcion

A student asks why God would establish a covenant he knew was inadequate. It is the old objection of Marcion, the early heretic who concluded the Old Testament could not be God's revelation. Schreiner's answer: the old covenant works typologically. God was slowly showing his people their sin and the provision to come, so that Israel became the laboratory that supplies the very categories, holiness, sacrifice, atonement, priesthood, by which the greatness of the fulfillment in Christ can be understood.

6. Numbers: the camp around the presence

Leviticus pauses the storyline to answer how a sinful people can live with a holy God; Numbers resumes the march. The word tabernacle sounds thirty-two times: the presence travels with the people. The camp is arranged at God's command around the tent, priests nearest, Judah given its place of honor, and purity guards it all. The church that neglects these books, Schreiner suggests, grows lax about sin, because it is here that God's holiness is burned into the imagination the New Testament presupposes.

7. The cloud: obedience in everything

Numbers 9 lingers over the cloud: when it lifted they set out, when it settled they camped, whether for two days, a month, or a year. At the LORD's command they camped, at the LORD's command they set out. The passage repeats itself until no reader can miss it: the life of God's people is obedience, in the timing as well as the substance.

8. The generation that would not enter

The wilderness generation lacked the Spirit, disbelieved the promise, and, like Eve, imagined that God meant to harm them. They would not enter, and their excuses, we cannot obey because of the children, were answered with terrible irony: the children will enter, and you will not. First Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 3 hold that generation up as a standing warning to the church. And the land itself is typological: Canaan points beyond itself, escalating as types always do, to the new creation.

9. Korah's rebellion: sin is insane

Korah, Dathan, and Abiram reject God's appointed order, and the earth swallows them. What follows is stranger still: Israel blames Moses and Aaron for their deaths. Sin, Schreiner says, is finally insane; it makes no sense. He adds a pastoral word: leaders sometimes truly must repent, and sometimes the charges against them have no foundation at all, and godliness is required in answering both.

10. A new start

The book's shape is simple: chapters 1 to 10, everything arranged and the camp ready; 11 to 20, the great failure, in which even Moses and Aaron forfeit the land; 21 to 36, a new beginning: a new generation counted, a new leader named in Joshua, the land promised afresh. Numbers ends with the nation poised on the border.

11. Balaam: the prophet who could only bless

At Israel's lowest point, Moab's king hires Balaam to curse them. Read all the Balaam passages together and the picture resolves: God opposes the going, because Balaam goes for money, as 2 Peter 2 remembers, and yet God sends him, because his mouth will carry blessing. The donkey sees the angel the seer cannot; the story knows perfectly well that donkeys do not talk, which is the point: the prophet-for-hire is blinder than his beast. Again and again the hired curser can speak nothing but blessing over a sinful people, and he dies at last fighting the nation he was forced to bless. God's covenant promises stand un-revoked.

12. The star and the scepter

In Numbers 24 the blessing sharpens into prophecy: I see him, but not now; a star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise from Israel, and he will crush the forehead of Moab. Hamilton reads it as Genesis 3:15 marching forward: the head of the enemy crushed by the coming one. The promise to Abraham will be fulfilled through a king, and the Pentateuch has said so all along, in Genesis 17, in Genesis 35, in Genesis 49, and now on the lips of Balaam. That king is Jesus Christ.

Scripture in this lecture

Leviticus 11, 19; Numbers 9, 11, 13, 14, 16, 20, 24; Genesis 17, 35, 49; 1 Corinthians 10; Hebrews 3; 1 Peter 1; 2 Peter 2

Key terms

Symbol, not sin

Uncleanness in Leviticus is not itself sin; it points analogically to the human condition before a holy God.

Separation, not health

The purity laws marked Israel off from the nations, which is why they end when Christ opens the covenant to all peoples.

The threefold map

Clean-for-sacrifice, clean, and unclean food answering to priest, Israelite, and Gentile, and to tabernacle, camp, and wilderness: a geography that teaches holiness.

The land as type

Canaan points beyond itself to the new creation, and the wilderness generation stands in 1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 3 as a warning to the church.

Sin is insane

After the earth swallowed Korah's rebellion, Israel blamed Moses and Aaron for the deaths: sin, finally, makes no sense.

The star and the scepter

Numbers 24's king out of Jacob who crushes the enemy's head: Genesis 3:15 and Genesis 49:10 gathered into one coming figure.

Comprehension check

Circle your answers, then check them against the key on the last page.

1. Is uncleanness in Leviticus itself sin?
 - A. Yes, in every case
 - B. Only for the priests
 - C. No: it symbolizes the human condition, pointing analogically to sin
 - D. The text draws no distinction
2. What was the fundamental purpose of the purity laws?
 - A. To separate Israel from the nations
 - B. To protect Israel's health
 - C. To support Israel's farmers
 - D. To test obedience arbitrarily
3. What is the strongest evidence the food laws were not given for health?
 - A. Pork is now considered healthy
 - B. Israel largely ignored them
 - C. Other nations kept the same laws
 - D. They are abolished now that Christ has come, which makes no sense if health were the point
4. The three categories of food answer to which three groups of people?
 - A. Kings, priests, and prophets
 - B. Priests, ordinary Israelites, and Gentiles
 - C. Men, women, and children
 - D. Levites, judges, and elders
5. How does the lecture say a Christian should preach Leviticus?
 - A. In light of its fulfillment in Christ, often in large sections
 - B. Verse by verse across several years
 - C. Only chapter 16
 - D. As law still binding on the church
6. What is the first and foremost character of Old Testament ethics?
 - A. Nation-centered
 - B. Family-centered
 - C. God-centered: I am the LORD, who redeemed and who sanctifies
 - D. Prosperity-centered
7. How does the lecture answer Marcion's objection that God would not replace a covenant?
 - A. Marcion was essentially right
 - B. The old covenant functions typologically, showing sin and supplying the categories for understanding the fulfillment in Christ
 - C. God changed his plan when Israel failed
 - D. The old covenant was never truly from God

8. What does the cloud over the tabernacle in Numbers 9 teach?
 - A. Weather determined Israel's route
 - B. The tabernacle needed protection from heat
 - C. Israel chose its own pace
 - D. Complete obedience: they camped and set out only at the LORD's command
9. What do 1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 3 do with the wilderness generation?
 - A. Hold them up as a warning to the church not to fall as Israel fell
 - B. Praise their perseverance
 - C. Treat them as history with no lesson
 - D. Blame Moses for their failure
10. In the New Testament, the land of Canaan points forward to what?
 - A. The map of modern Israel
 - B. The church building
 - C. The new creation, the whole renewed universe
 - D. An escape from the body
11. What did Israel do after the earth swallowed Korah, Dathan, and Abiram?
 - A. Repented at once
 - B. Blamed Moses and Aaron for their deaths
 - C. Fled back toward Egypt
 - D. Crowned a new king
12. What does Balaam's oracle of the star and the scepter promise?
 - A. Guidance from the stars
 - B. Moab's repentance
 - C. Balaam's reward
 - D. A king out of Jacob who will crush the enemy's head, the promise fulfilled in Christ

Talk it over

1. Israel camped and set out only at the LORD's command, whether the wait was two days or a year. Where is God asking your household for that kind of unhurried, unexplained obedience right now?
2. Schreiner suggests the church grows lax about sin partly because it neglects the Old Testament's vision of God's holiness. What would change in your week if the God of Leviticus were as vivid to you as he was meant to be to Israel?
3. Balaam could only bless, because God's promises to a failing people stood un-revoked. Where do you need that comfort, and where might you be tempted to misuse it as an excuse?

One verse to carry

Numbers 24:17, spoken through an unwilling prophet: a star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise from Israel, and he will crush the enemy.

Go further

Michael Morales' study of Leviticus, commended in Lecture 5, stands behind this lecture's reading of the cleanness laws, and Jim Hamilton's article on Genesis 3:15, named in Lecture 1, traces the head-crushing promise through Balaam's oracle.

Lecture 6 Comprehension Check

1. C. No: it symbolizes the human condition, pointing analogically to sin (*outline section 1*)
2. A. To separate Israel from the nations (*outline section 2*)
3. D. They are abolished now that Christ has come, which makes no sense if health were the point (*outline section 2*)
4. B. Priests, ordinary Israelites, and Gentiles (*outline section 2*)
5. A. In light of its fulfillment in Christ, often in large sections (*outline section 3*)
6. C. God-centered: I am the LORD, who redeemed and who sanctifies (*outline section 4*)
7. B. The old covenant functions typologically, showing sin and supplying the categories for understanding the fulfillment in Christ (*outline section 5*)
8. D. Complete obedience: they camped and set out only at the LORD's command (*outline section 7*)
9. A. Hold them up as a warning to the church not to fall as Israel fell (*outline section 8*)
10. C. The new creation, the whole renewed universe (*outline section 8*)
11. B. Blamed Moses and Aaron for their deaths (*outline section 9*)
12. D. A king out of Jacob who will crush the enemy's head, the promise fulfilled in Christ (*outline section 12*)