

Live a Distinct Life [Slide 1] Leviticus 11-12

A people who serve a holy God must be distinct from those who do not. Living in the presence of a holy God should change people. It should make them different from those who do not live in the presence of a holy God. What made the Israelites distinct and set apart from the other nations of their time was that they observed a Sabbath once a week, the males all were circumcised, they observed food laws only eating “clean animals,” they observed certain annual sacred feasts, and offered certain prescribed sacrifices. As they obeyed the laws God gave them in their covenant relationship, they distinguished themselves from the other nations.

If you look at Exodus 19:5-6 on your sermon outline, God spells out that when the people keep his covenant, they become God’s unique holy nation. Let’s read those verses. Read.

God speaks these words to Moses on Mount Sinai before he reveals to Moses the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law. The keeping of God’s Law would make the Israelites a holy nation. The word holy means “set apart” or “consecrated.” Keeping the Mosaic Law would set apart or distinguish the Israelites as God’s own chosen people out of all the peoples of the earth. As the other nations observed the Israelites keeping God’s various commands they would realize that the Israelites were Yahweh’s people.

But what about us today in the church? We are not under the Old Testament Law. Are we supposed to be distinct in some way? If so, how are we to be distinct? What distinguishes us as God’s people today? And what about the clean and unclean foods? Why are we eating pork and shrimp now days, when the Israelites couldn’t eat those animals? We’ll learn the answers to these questions today, including how the OT food laws might have a lesson to teach about Hurricane Harvey relief work.

[Slide 2] Turn to Leviticus 11-12 in your Bible. Leviticus is the third book in the Old Testament. I’m going to summarize these chapters on your sermon outline and then talk about their significance for us today. Leviticus 11 lists the animals the Israelites could and could not eat. The clean animals that Israelites could eat were first those that divided the hoof and chewed cud which included cattle, goats and sheep. Aquatic organisms with fins and scales, fish could be eaten. Locusts, crickets, and grasshoppers were clean animals. If a clean animal died and you touched its carcass you would be unclean until the evening.

The unclean animals were camels, badgers, rabbits, and pigs. Crustaceans, squid, octopus, and catfish were unclean. You could not eat raptors, that is all your hunting birds like eagles, hawks and falcons, as well as storks, herons and bats. All your swarming creatures such as insects, spiders, centipedes, etc. were unclean. Most mammals and reptiles were unclean. If you touched a carcass you were unclean and if any of the unclean animals fell into an earthenware vessel or oven, the utensil had to be destroyed.

The purpose of these regulations is stated in verses 45-47 which I will read. Read. So part of being God’s holy people meant making a distinction between clean and unclean animals in your diet. I’m glad we’re not under the OT Law because I like my shrimp and crab and fried catfish.

People have come up with all sorts of theories as to how God decided what was clean and what was unclean, but none of the theories consistently explains all animals. It wasn’t for sanitary reasons or because some of these animals were associated with pagan worship because some clean animals like the bull were associated with pagan worship and some of the unclean

animals are more hygienic than the clean animals. God never provides a reason for how he distinguished between clean and unclean animals so we are probably wasting our time speculating on the reason. It is not important to know. The bottom line is that by following God's laws the Israelites distinguished themselves from the other nations.

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God also gave purity laws concerning bodily fluids. In chapter 12 a woman was rendered unclean by menstruation or by childbirth because of the flow of blood. For childbirth she had to observe so many days of purification, the number depending on the child's gender, and then she would offer a sin offering which symbolized the removal of the effects of sin. Leviticus 15 discusses how men's bodily discharges, mainly seminal discharges rendered them unclean. Being unclean did not mean that you had personally sinned, but it did mean that in your daily activities you had become contaminated by living in a sinful world and you needed to be cleansed in order to come into God's presence.

Why was the flow of blood or bodily fluids a source of uncleanness? Most likely it is because both illustrated death. The loss of too much blood does kill you, so the flow of any blood could represent the onset of death. It is also true that both menstruation and men's seminal discharges represent death because in both cases the reproductive cells have failed to fertilize and thus have died or will soon die. This is consistent with the restriction not to touch a carcass lest you be made unclean. Death is an effect of sin and so anything dead or resembling death was a source of ceremonial uncleanness.

[Slide 4] Gentiles have never been under the Law and the NT rescinded the ceremonial purity laws for the Jews. Turn in your Bible to Mark 7:14-23. Mark is the second book in the New Testament. Mark 7:14-23. I will read that passage. Read.

Jesus stated the principle that what really defiles a person is what is already in their heart, not that which is outside of them whether it be certain animals, carcasses, blood, or whatever. What truly makes a person unclean is the sin that resides in their heart which is expressed outwardly through fornication, theft, murder, adultery, envy, slander, pride, etc. You ask then why did God have all these food laws and laws about ceremonial uncleanness? They were object lessons. They taught the people that they needed to be clean before God and that they needed to be distinct from those who did not follow God.

Later in Acts 10 God showed Peter a vision of a sheet lowered with all sorts of animals on it, those labeled clean and those labeled unclean by the Law, and God told Peter to no longer call any animal unclean. The ritual purity laws ended with Jesus and the reason they ended is because Jesus redefined how God's people are now to be distinct.

[Slide 5] God's people are no longer distinguished by what they eat, wear, or by other physical means but rather by the internal transformation of their hearts that results in an outward change. The Gospel of John records three of those distinguishing marks of a Christian.

The first distinguishing mark of Christians is their love for their fellow believers. Look at John 13:34-35. Read. Jesus said that all men will know we are his disciples by the love we have for one another. Loving our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ is one of the ways we are to be distinct from those who are not Christ followers. A lot of organizations exist in this world, some of which provide humanitarian aid and do good deeds. What should separate the church from a secular organization is how we treat one another. What should separate us in the hurricane relief and recovery efforts is how we love one another as we serve together to meet people's needs. We are able to love one another because of the power of the Holy Spirit enabling us.

Let's face it. Some of us are not that naturally lovable and when we are tired and worn out from working, and maybe even in a little bit of pain, it's hard to be gracious and loving even to our fellow believers. But Jesus compels us to do that very thing and the Holy Spirit energizes us to respond with kindness and graciousness. When non-Christians observe that kind of love and they know from experience it is not natural or typical, then God can convince them that knowing God will actually make a difference in their life, because God was able to make a difference in our lives.

[Slide 6] A second distinctive mark of Christians is unity among believers. Look at John 17:22-23 on your outline. This is Jesus' prayer to the Father. Read. Jesus said that when we are perfected in unity with God and with each other, then the world will know that God sent Jesus. Jesus was here speaking about his disciples saying that when they acted in unity, it proved to the world that their leader, Jesus, was sent by God because that kind of unity is supernatural.

Consider those disciples. One was a zealot who hated any collaborators with Rome and one was a tax collector who collaborated with Rome. When Jews saw Simon the Zealot fellowshipping with Matthew the tax collector they were blown away. Who is this who can unite zealot and tax collector?

Nevertheless except for their different politics and perhaps economic backgrounds, that group of 11 was very homogenous. They were all Jews, all the same skin color, all the same language and culture, and yet Jesus said that their unity proved to the Jews looking at them that God had sent Jesus.

How much more our unity today can proclaim the truth of Jesus. In the church we can bring together different races, people with different languages and countries, different socio-economic backgrounds, different politics. The world loves to see and craves to see people of great diversity work in unity. What does everyone praise about the Hurricane Harvey relief efforts? They all praise the fact that when people are rescuing people in boats from their homes and car tops, working in shelters, feeding people, building sandbag levees, there is no attention to skin color, or politics, or country of origin, or legal status. The world loves and craves unity in diversity because God has placed the desire for heaven in each of our hearts and that is what heaven is. When people see a foretaste of Heaven on the Earth as they have recently, they long for it. Don't you long for it as well?

Crisis can unify people of great diversity for a while, but it cannot maintain that unity. Once the crisis passes, sin will reassert itself and we will once more be rent by strife and division, but the church can be the exception. When we live in unity around our common Lord, our common salvation, our common mission, then we become a picture of what this world craves. I hope that in the years to come Hope Fellowship becomes more diverse in skin color and country of origin and in economics because our unity will then make even a more compelling case that the Kingdom of God has already come to the earth. When people outside the church see both diversity and unity in the church, they begin to suspect that God may actually exist and act in this world and we have the opportunity to be that vision to a watching world.

[Slide 7] A third distinguishing mark of a Christian is that they bear fruit in their lives. Look at John 15:7-8 on your outline. Read.

According to Jesus, when we abide in Jesus we produce fruit and that fruit proves to the world that we are Jesus' disciples. That fruit can be good deeds of love and kindness. It can be the salvation of others. It can be the fruit of the Spirit reflecting Christ-like character. It can be the positive effects of intervening in someone's life.

Look at 1 Peter 2:9-12 which is the NT application for the followers of Christ being a holy nation. Read. Peter mentions a number of things we as a royal priesthood and holy nation are supposed to do. Verse 9, we proclaim the excellencies of God. Verse 11 we abstain from fleshly lusts or to put it positively, we practice moral purity. Verse 12 we maintain excellent behavior and we do good deeds that cause those outside the church to glorify God. This is some of the fruit we produce when we abide in Christ.

I want to provide you with some very specific application points on ministering personally to hurricane victims as you bear fruit and then talk about our corporate strategy in the days to come. Let's say you are talking to someone in a shelter or visiting someone in their flooded out home or you strike up a conversation with a flood victim in the store. What can you do to minister?

Ask them if they would like to share their story and then listen to them. Let them talk as long as they want. A listening ear is so critical in the days to come. Remember that their greatest need is probably not one you can see with your eyes. If we are gutting out a home, please don't be in such a hurry to get started. Take the time to listen and then offer to pray for them. Ask them: How can we pray for you? In the early stages allow them to grieve. They may not want to throw away that cherished piece of furniture or that pile of waterlogged pictures even though you know they need to be tossed. You may have to patiently wait for them to make a hard decision.

We need both manual laborers at work sites but we also are going to need some of our women who will just sit and talk with the women who have lost so much. We need people who will ask how their kids are doing, who can share with them how God loves them. We also need to respect people's dignity. It is better for them to work with us if they can. At the outset we need to discuss together what we can and will do, not coming in as a know it all, but as someone willing to make suggestions but also willing to listen to them.

I want you to think of two categories of help in this disaster: relief and recovery. Relief is mainly what is going on right now. It is the immediate providing of shelter, food, clothing, and money so that people have the basic necessities to live. It is preparing and serving meals at shelters and to helpers, taking food to evacuees in motels, donating supplies, etc. The relief phase will last for a short time. Most of the time with relief work you are dealing with large numbers of people or maybe not even dealing directly with the evacuees but gathering and organizing resources. Hope Fellowship has decided to support and partner with those groups and agencies that are already doing this work such as the Dream Center, River of Hope, True to Life Ministries, the shelters at Willow Drive, the Vineyard, and other places. Those agencies and groups need our help. We are asking you to take the initiative and volunteer with them.

The second stage of help is recovery. This is the stage of helping people get back into their homes. It begins with cleaning and gutting out houses so they can dry out, be demolded and prepared for remodeling. Then comes the actual remodeling work. Recovery could last for years. Many homes in Holiday Lakes had not even remodeled from last Summer's flood on the Brazos, before they got inundated again. The damage is far more extensive this time over a larger aread and it will take even longer to recover.

We want our church's efforts to align with our mission which is to make a difference in the Brazosport Community by winning, building and equipping reproducing disciples for Jesus Christ. A disciple making philosophy requires that we look to build relationships with people and build on the ones that we already have. It is in the context of relationships that we can model what it looks like to follow Jesus Christ and we can share the good news of God's love. We want to organize church group efforts that encourage the building of relationships so that our

recovery efforts can lead to making disciples. These efforts will necessarily be focused on single families and maybe neighborhoods.

We can't meet every need and we want our efforts to be fruitful for the kingdom so we are going to approach recovery like a funnel. At the narrowest point at the bottom of the funnel are our church people, those who call Hope Fellowship their home church. Our plan is to make sure they are helped first. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ and the Bible tells us to do good to all people, but especially those of the household of faith. They will be our first priority. Higher up the funnel where it is wider are friends and neighbors of our people. These are the people that God has already placed in our sphere of influence. They are potentially people ready for the Gospel or ready to take the next step of growth. Because they already have a friend with a Hope Fellowship attendee we want to enhance that friendship by assisting them. Finally at the top of the funnel are people who at present have no connection with Hope Fellowship, but whom God might want us to reach. These are people whom the Holy Spirit will bring into our path either while helping someone else or through a divine appointment or by some other means.

I'm asking that you not promise on the church's behalf that we will help someone, but that you will make the need known to us and if the church is able to help we will seek to assist them.

So, you are free to eat all the shrimp, crab and pork you want, but now you need to show the love of Christ to your fellow believers and to those outside the faith. You need to maintain the unity of the body and you need to do good works and give God the credit for them. That's not such a bad deal.