

Dr. David A. deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 7, Purity and Pollution, Podcast Audio Summary

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All right, strap in, everybody. We're going deep on a topic a lot of you have been asking about: Purity and pollution in ancient Judaism. Mm-hmm. Yeah, we've got dr.

Okay, from his class on the cultural world of the New Testament, and honestly, it's a lot more interesting than it sounds. Oh, yeah, like way more. So we're going to try to figure out why. Purity was so important to the ancient Israelites right how it showed up in their daily life Yeah, and get this we might even find some surprising connections to how we live today because let's be real We all have our own little purity codes Even if we don't call them that exactly like have you ever seen someone double-dipping and just cringed or like when someone sneezes right next to You yeah, you know, but before we get to us, let's go back to ancient Israel and try to understand their whole worldview Okay, and it all starts with their idea Of a holy God, right their idea of God wasn't just about being good It was about this like radiating holiness that affected everything It was like this cosmic order with God at the center and everything else having its own specific place So if everything has its place what happens when things get out of place? That's where pollution comes in, right? Exactly. Pollution, whether physical or moral, messes up this divine order, and for the Israelites, this wasn't just some like icky feeling. It was a serious threat to their relationship with God. Wow, and to their entire community. And get this: they didn't separate ritual purity and moral law like we do today. Wait, really? So like touching something unclean was as bad as telling a lie. Well, not exactly the same, but they were all part of the same I don't know the same fabric. Like Leviticus 19 puts laws about loving your neighbor right next to rules about mixing crops or fabrics.

They're all connected for them. Okay, so it's not just about being a germaphobe. It's about keeping this cosmic order. Reflecting God's holiness in every single part of life, exactly. But how do they even keep track of what was clean and what was unclean? It seems like a lot, right? Well, that's where their categories come in. It's like imagine a map. Instead of places, these maps chart out people, spaces, time, food, even bodies. Wow, all arranged by their level of purity. Dr. De Silva calls them purity maps.

I love those purity maps. Okay, I'm into it. So walk me through it. How did they map people? Okay, so picture a hierarchy at the top. You've got the high priest, the most holy.

Okay, and you've got priests Levites regular Israelites and at the very bottom Gentiles, so it's kind of like a VIP system different access levels depending on who you are Exactly, and the temple was like a physical version of this hierarchy Okay, it had these concentric circles of holiness with the Holy of Holies in the very center Only the high priest could go in there and even then only once a year And even just within the temple there were strict boundaries. Dr. De Silva tells this story from 2nd Maccabees about a guy named Heliodorus who tried to get into the temple treasury, you know, the space for the holiest offerings. Well, let's just

say it didn't end well for him. Okay, that's intense, but it shows how seriously they took these boundaries. So we've got the people map right with its levels of holiness.

What about spaces? It sounds like the temple was a big deal. Oh, absolutely. It was the center of their world, really, like a microcosm of their worldview with purity at its core. But it wasn't just about the physical spaces. They also mapped out time. Hold on, mapping time now I'm really interested. Think about the Sabbath.

Okay, it wasn't just a day off. It was holy time. Time set aside for rest and connecting with God; their whole week revolved around this rhythm of work and rest, mirroring the divine pattern of creation. So they saw time itself as having the sacred order. That's pretty mind-blowing, but we've covered people, spaces, time, right? What about food? Where does that fit in? Food was huge. Their dietary laws what they could eat and couldn't eat were a big part of keeping pure, and it wasn't just about hygiene or what we think of as healthy today.

I see these laws were super symbolic, tied to their covenant with God. So it's kind of like how some people today are vegan or eat organic for ethical or environmental reasons. Yeah, their food choices weren't just preference; they were a real way of showing their commitment to holiness and their relationship with God. Got it. Okay, I'm seeing how all this fits together: people, spaces, time, food. Yeah, but what about the body itself? Where does that fit into all of this? The body wasn't just some container.

It was a microcosm of the whole social body almost like a little temple and Here's where it gets interesting they thought of orifices the openings in the body as Particularly vulnerable to pollution wait, seriously why orifices? Well, think about it: orifices are where the inside meets the outside, where the boundaries of the body are weakest. Okay, that makes sense. So they weren't just worried about personal hygiene. They were protecting the boundaries of the whole community. Exactly. It's all connected, but we've been talking about the what of purity for a while now. I think it's time to dig into the why: why did they care so much about all this, right? It does seem like a lot of effort to go through all these rituals and rules. Yeah, it was driving it all; it goes back to that idea of God's holiness. Remember, it wasn't enough to just acknowledge it; I had to actively reflect it in their lives. That's at the core of all this, all these rules and rituals.

So it wasn't about avoiding punishment. It was more about trying to be like God. Yes, but fear definitely played a part, too. Okay, they believed that defilement could actually pollute the land. Wow, which could lead to exile. Remember, they had the story of the Canaanites being driven out because of impurity, right? Okay, so that's some serious motivation to stay clean. Definitely, but did everyone have the same level of responsibility when it came to purity? Like did a normal person have to be as careful as a priest? That's a great question, and it actually shows another layer of this whole system. Okay, the level of concern depended on your role and how close you were to the holy. So, like, the closer to the top of that hierarchy we talked about, the higher the stakes. Exactly. The high priest being the most holy had the strictest rules to follow makes sense.

But what about really serious offenses? Were there any? Unforgivable acts things you just couldn't cleanse no matter what. Oh, yeah, there were. Dr. De Silva mentions that some things were considered so bad. Mm-hmm, like idolatry, which was a direct insult to God, or

breaking the Sabbath, right? You know, their holy time for those; there was no ritual that could fix it. Huh, the only solution was destruction.

It really shows how deep these ideas were in their worldview. Wow, intense. It's kind of like those taboos we have today. Yeah, things that are just so wrong. They're beyond fixing, right? But even within Judaism, there seem to have been different levels of strictness. Dr. De Silva talks about the Pharisees. Yeah, they're thinking about secondary pollution.

What is that? Okay, so imagine you touch something that touched something unclean. Okay, for most people, no big deal, right? But for the Pharisees, that second degree of contact was enough to make you unclean. Really, they were really strict. It's like they were creating an even smaller circle within Judaism, separating themselves from everyone else, and that's a really interesting point. It shows how these purity codes, yeah, while about the relationship with God, also had social implications. It raises the question of who gets to decide what's clean and what's not, right, and what happens to those who don't measure up. It makes me think about how we still do that today. Yeah, maybe not with ritual purity, but with all sorts of social boundaries, right? We judge people based on how they look, their lifestyle, what they believe. It's like we're still using those purity maps in a way. Exactly. Yeah, maybe we haven't come as far from ancient Israel as we think. Maybe not the rituals might be different. The language might have changed, but those basic human needs and fears They're still there, right? We're still trying to figure out how to create order in a world that often feels chaotic. Yeah, what does it mean to be clean, pure, good? And how do we fit into it all? Those are big questions, and it seems like the Israelites' answer was this whole system of purity codes. He was a big part of it.

Yeah, but honestly it can feel kind of restrictive even judgmental I understand that was there a more positive side to all of this maybe even something freeing about it That's a great question and it brings us to another part of this that I find fascinating Okay, it's not just about what they were trying to avoid the pollution the bad stuff Yeah, it's about what they were reaching for. So it wasn't just about staying clean. It was about actively pursuing holiness. Exactly, but what did that actually look like? Was it all rituals and sacrifices? Yeah, it wasn't just about staying away from bad stuff. It was about actively trying to be holy.

But what did that actually look like? Was it all just rituals and sacrifices? Well, those were part of it, but it went way beyond that. Remember, they saw holiness as woven into everything, right? So pursuing holiness meant aligning yourself with that divine order in every single part of your life: your actions, your thoughts, your relationships, your community all of it. So it wasn't just about what you did. It was about having a pure heart, so to speak, exactly, and that meant doing all sorts of things like rituals and sacrifices, sure, but also charity, ethical behavior, studying the Torah, prayer.

Oh, wow, even things like self-control and mindfulness. It almost sounds like a guide to living a better life. Mm-hmm. Not just following rules, but actually becoming a better person I think that's a really beautiful way to put it.

It wasn't just about avoiding the negative. It was about actively pursuing the good. Yeah, about trying to live in a way that brought them closer to God and to each other, and that desire for connection, for meaning, for something bigger than ourselves. That's something

we can all relate to, right? But we might not use the word holiness anymore, right? But that longing for something more a sense of purpose a place to belong totally that's universal absolutely, we all have that yearning to be connected to something bigger than ourselves whether it's a spiritual belief a Community a cause or even just a sense of purpose and a lot of times that sense of connection comes with its own boundaries Its own set of values and beliefs that define what it means to belong, right? You see it in any group, any movement, any ideology. They all have their own Purity codes, even if they don't call them that. So whether we're talking about ancient Israelites or modern movements, these purity maps are constantly changing, reflecting how our values and beliefs change, exactly, and just like those ancient maps, right? Our modern ones can be both helpful and harmful.

They can give us direction and purpose. Yeah, but they can also lead to division, exclusion, even violence. That's a sobering thought It seems like the key is to be aware of the maps We're using absolutely really examine our own beliefs and biases and see how they affect How we interact with the world and to be open to the idea that our maps might be Incomplete or even wrong there might be other ways of seeing the world by other paths to meaning and belonging So what does all of this mean for you dear listener? What can we take away from this deep dive into ancient purity? I think the biggest takeaway is this the ancient Israelites might seem a million miles away from us But their struggles with purity and pollution are surprisingly relatable Yeah, they speak to something very human the desire for order for meaning for belonging and even though their practices might seem Outdated to us those basic impulses are still very much alive today It's like we're all still using those purity maps to navigate this crazy world and trying to find our place And just like those ancient maps. Yeah, ours can be both good and bad. The important thing is to be aware of the maps we're using right now and to be open to the idea that there might be other Ways of seeing things. So as you go about your day, to your listener, think about the things you consider sacred, untouchable. Are there any purity codes you follow, even if you don't realize it? What happens when those boundaries are crossed? Something to think about, isn't it? That's the beauty of a good deep dive. It really is.

Thanks for joining us on this deep dive. We'll see you next time