

Dr. David A. deSilva, The Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 8, Reading Hebrews Attuned to Purity and Pollution, Podcast Audio Summary

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Hey everyone, welcome to this deep dive, and today we're going to be looking at purity and pollution in the book of Hebrews. Oh, that's an interesting one. Yeah, I thought so, and to help us unpack all of this. We're going to be drawing from a lecture by Dr. David deSilva. Okay, now you might be surprised to learn that even though Hebrews is part of the Christian Bible, right? It has a lot to say about the Jewish temple and its rituals. That is interesting. It's fascinating how Hebrews sort of brings those two worlds together. Yeah, the book's audience was most likely Jewish Christians who had a background in Paul's teachings.

Okay, so we've got Jewish Christians familiar with Paul, right? How does that help us understand their views on purity? Well, Paul, you know as we see in Romans and Galatians, really kind of shook things up. He challenged the idea that you had to follow Jewish law to be right with God. Right, and he argued that in Christ the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles had been broken down. Wow. Yeah, and this was just a totally radical departure from the prevailing Jewish worldview of the time. Yeah, yeah, purity laws dictated so much of daily life. So accepting Jesus wasn't just a personal belief but a complete paradigm shift. Really? Yeah, it makes you wonder how those early Christians reconciled this new faith with their existing Cultural understanding of purity.

Yeah, that's it. That's a great question. The Holy Spirit becomes really important here. Okay, both Paul's letters and the book of Acts emphasize the Holy Spirit being given to both Jews and Gentiles right as proof that God was doing something new. Yeah, something that transcended those old categories of clean and unclean, so the old lines of purity based on Ethnicity were being erased, but that doesn't mean the concept of purity just vanished entirely, right? He was still using that language, right? You're absolutely right: the early Christians, even as they dismantled one boundary, right? They created another one.

They started calling themselves saints, which means holy ones. So this created a new distinction now between those who follow Christ and those who didn't, so it's like a redrawing of the lines, but using a familiar language, right, but with a whole new meaning. Exactly. What I find really intriguing is that Hebrews doesn't dwell on the actual physical temple in Jerusalem, right? Instead, it focuses on entering God's presence in a more spiritual, transcendent way. Exactly, Hebrews focuses on the heavenly sanctuary, not the earthly one. Okay, but this raises an important question: if God's presence is so holy, yeah, how can ordinary people, even saints, be pure enough to enter such a sacred space? That's a good point. That is a really good point, and Hebrews offers an answer to this. It all comes down to Jesus's sacrifice, right? I am very curious to see how they connect those ideas.

Well, Hebrews 10.10 and 10.14 specifically explain how Jesus's sacrifice makes believers holy, and to understand this we need to consider the importance of blood in both Jewish and Christian thought at the time. Okay, blood was seen as essential for atonement for the forgiveness of sins, but Hebrews isn't saying we should go back to animal sacrifices, right?

They're arguing that Jesus's sacrifice is fundamentally different; precisely, Hebrews critiques those old sacrifices, right? Points out their repetition, their limitations, arguing that they can't truly cleanse the conscience. So, how does Hebrews explain the mechanics of this internal cleansing? It seems like they draw heavily on the Jewish Day of Atonement ritual to make their point. Yeah, you've hit the nail on the head. Okay, Hebrews uses that ritual as a framework to help their audience grasp the significance of Jesus's death and Ascension. Okay, can you remind us of the key elements of that ritual? Okay, so imagine the most solemn day of the year, the Day of Atonement, right? The high priest first goes through these purification rituals. Then he sacrifices a bull for his own sins and a goat for the sins of the people. He sprinkles the blood in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred space in the temple. Yes, and then there's the scapegoat, right? Right, the priest symbolically transfers all the sins of the people onto this goat, and it's sent out into the wilderness, carrying those sins away.

What a vivid description. Yeah Hebrews maps these elements onto Jesus's actions Hebrew 7 emphasizes that Jesus Being sinless doesn't need to offer sacrifices for himself, right his death outside the city as mentioned in Hebrews 13 Parallels the burning of sacrificial animals outside the camp right and his Ascension to heaven Described in Hebrews 9 is likened to the high priest entering the Holy of Holies So what Hebrews is getting at is that Jesus is both the ultimate sacrifice And the high priest that's a pretty radical concept. Absolutely.

It's mind-blowing when you really think about it. Yeah, but it's important to remember that Hebrews isn't talking about a literal physical event here. Okay, they're describing a cosmic shift Oh in how humans relate to God that makes sense They're using this really vivid imagery to convey a really profound theological truth I think Hebrews 10.1 922 really captures this Talking about how believers can now boldly enter the heavenly Holy of Holies because of Jesus's blood What a powerful message for those early Christians no longer limited by those earthly rituals But given direct access to God, it's truly a message of liberation Yeah, hope but here's where it gets even more interesting Even though the old sacrifices are obsolete right Hebrews doesn't abandon the idea of sacrifice altogether. Oh, okay They call for new forms of sacrifice Fitting for this new era you're talking about Hebrews 13.1 516 Yeah, where it talks about offering sacrifices praise good deeds and sharing exactly these actions become the new expressions of faith for this transformed community So we're seeing this shift from external rituals to an internal transformation of the heart, right? Which then manifests in these outward actions. What I'm curious about is: how did this new understanding of purity? Impact the way early Christians viewed themselves and their community?

That's a great question. It's like they were given a whole new map, one that redefined their understanding of holiness and belonging. Yeah, the old markers of purity, you know, like ethnicity and strict adherence to ritual laws, those were replaced with a new emphasis on faith in Christ and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. So instead of focusing on who was in and who was out, it became more about this shared identity rooted in their relationship with Christ, exactly, but did this new understanding of purity change? How he interacted with the world around them.

Absolutely Hebrews doesn't shy away from the challenges of living out this new identity. Okay, it acknowledges the temptations to drift away from the faith, to give in to sin, to isolate oneself from the community. These were all seen as threats to their purity, not in a ritualistic sense, but in terms of their relationship with God and each other, so it's like maintaining this internal purity, this connection to Christ. Was this ongoing struggle exact, this constant battle against forces that could pull them away? That must have been incredibly difficult in a world that didn't always share their values. Exactly, and that's where the importance of community comes in. Hebrews emphasizes the need to gather together, right, to encourage one another and to hold each other accountable. They recognized that they needed each other's support to stay on this path of holiness. It sounds like the early church wasn't just a place for worship, but also like a vital source of strength and encouragement. Absolutely, safe haven. Yeah, where they could practice these new sacrifices of praise, good deeds, and sharing. You're absolutely right, but Hebrews doesn't limit their responsibility to just the community. It also calls them to be a light in the darkness, right, to embody God's holiness in a world that's so desperately needed. It makes you think about what it means to be a saint today. You know, Holy One, set apart. It's not about withdrawing from the world, but about engaging with it, about letting that internal purity flow outward and impact our interactions, our choices. Yes, and ultimately the world around us.

That's a powerful insight, and it challenges us to consider how we're living out our faith today. Yeah, we content ourselves with just believing the right things, yeah, or are we actively striving to embody the purity and holiness that Christ made possible? I think that's a question. We all need to wrestle with it. It's not always easy, is it? Yeah, especially in a world that bombards us with messages that kind of contradict this whole idea of purity messages that, you know, promote self-interest, instant gratification, and a focus on external appearances.

You've hit on a key point. Yeah, the concept of purity that Hebrews presents challenges us to re-examine our own values, our priorities, how we define success and happiness. Yeah, it invites us to consider what really matters, what brings lasting joy, and how we can align our lives with God's purposes. It's like Hebrews is calling us to step back and kind of reassess our maps, you know, the ones that we use to navigate life. Yeah, are they leading us towards true purity? There's that deeper connection with God and others, or are they taking us in a different direction? I think that's a brilliant analogy, you know, we often create our own systems of purity and pollution, our own categories of clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable, you know, based on our own biases and prejudices. It's like we're constantly drawing lines in the sand, separating ourselves from those we deem different or unworthy, and in doing so, we not only perpetuate that division and judgment, but also miss out on the richness and the beauty of God's diverse creation. And that's where Hebrews' message of radical inclusion comes in. Yeah, it reminds us that in Christ, those old distinctions no longer have power. The dividing wall has been broken down, and we're invited into this new community where love, grace, and acceptance reign supreme. So true purity isn't about separating ourselves from the world or from people we deem impure. But about allowing God's love to transform us from the inside out, and to flow through us to others, regardless of their background or beliefs. Exactly.

It's about embodying a love that transcends boundaries, a love that seeks to heal, restore, and reconcile. It's about recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of every human being,

created in the image of God. This is challenging, isn't it, to really live out this radical vision of purity? It requires us to confront our own biases, right, to step outside our comfort zone, right, and to extend grace in places where we might not feel comfortable. You're right.

It's not easy, but it's also incredibly liberating. Yeah, because when we let go of our need to categorize and judge when we allow God's love to break down those barriers. Yeah, we open ourselves up to a whole new way of being in the world. It's like we're finally able to enter that heavenly holy of holies not just in some future sense, but right here right now. We experience the reality of God's presence in our lives in our relationships and in the world around us. And that's what makes Hebrews so powerful and so relevant. It's not just some ancient text about rituals and sacrifices. It's a message of hope, transformation, and radical love that speaks to the deepest longings of our hearts, and it challenges us to live differently. To be agents of reconciliation and healing in a world that's so often divided and broken, it begs the question: What would our world look like if we truly embraced this radical vision of purity? That's a powerful question to consider. What if we let go of our need to categorize and judge and instead focused on building bridges of love and understanding? What if we saw every person we encountered as a sacred vessel bearing the image of God, right? What if we allowed grace to guide our interactions and compassion to shape our responses? It's a beautiful and challenging vision and it requires us to be intentional to examine our motives and to actively choose love over fear. Acceptance over judgment and it's a journey not a destination. We'll stumble we'll make mistakes. But the key is to keep moving forward to keep striving towards that deeper understanding and embodiment of true purity. It's about allowing Jesus's sacrifice to cleanse us from the inside out to break the power of sin and death in our lives. And to set us free to live a life of true purity and purpose and that freedom that purpose isn't just for our own benefit. It spills over into the world around us transforming our relationships our communities and ultimately the very fabric of society. It's like we become living sacrifices offering ourselves and our actions as a testament to the transformative power of God's love. We become vessels of grace carrying the light of Christ into the darkest corners of the world. It's incredible to think about the ripple effect that embracing this kind of radical purity can have. We've talked about how it changes us internally how it shapes our communities. But what about the broader impact? How does this vision of purity speak to the challenges we face in the world today? Well, that's a really important question. I mean if we look at the world around us, you know, we see so much division so much conflict so much pain. It's easy to just feel overwhelmed by it all. But Hebrews reminds us that we're not called to just withdraw from all the messiness of life. We're called to engage with it to be agents of healing and reconciliation. But how do we do that? Where do we even begin when we're faced with such enormous challenges? Well, I think Hebrews gives us a few clues. Firstly it reminds us that true purity isn't about creating more division, you know more categories more us versus them, right? It's about breaking down those walls about recognizing our shared humanity and about extending grace even to those we might consider our enemies so it's about moving beyond our comfort zones beyond our preconceived notions and opening ourselves to the possibility of connection and understanding even with those who hold different views or have different backgrounds exactly and that's not always easy. It takes humility courage and a willingness to listen to learn and to empathize. Yeah. But I think it's precisely in those spaces of discomfort those places where we're forced to confront our own biases and prejudices that real transformation happens. It's like those encounters those moments of genuine connection

become these little glimpses of the heavenly holy of holies Breaking into our world, you know revealing the possibility of a different way of being a different way of relating to one another That's a beautiful way to put it and it's a reminder that this journey towards purity isn't a solitary pursuit, right? We need each other. We need that support the encouragement the accountability of a community to help us stay the course So while that old sacrificial system of the temple has been replaced by the ultimate sacrifice of Christ The idea of sacrifice itself hasn't disappeared it's been transformed into something deeper something more meaningful Absolutely the sacrifices we're called to make today are sacrifices of selflessness of compassion of forgiveness of Standing up for justice speaking truth to power there are the sacrifices of choosing love over hate hope over despair and unity over division and those sacrifices Though often invisible have the power to change the world They ripple outwards touching lives transforming communities and ultimately creating a more just and compassionate society It's like each act of kindness each gesture of forgiveness each moment of genuine connection becomes this tiny thread woven into this larger tapestry of hope a Testament to the power of God's love to heal and restore our broken world It's incredible to think about that ripple effect now and embracing this radical purity We've talked about how it changes us internally shapes our communities.

But what about that broader impact? How does this vision of purity speak to the challenges we face in the world today? That's a really important question. You know, if we look at the world around us today, we just see so much division, so much conflict, so much pain. Yeah, it's really easy to feel overwhelmed by all the brokenness. Yeah, but Hebrews reminds us that we're not called to just withdraw from all the messiness of life, right? We're called to engage with it to be those agents of healing and reconciliation.

But how do we do that? Where do we even begin when we're faced with such? Enormous challenges. I think Hebrews gives us a few clues Okay, firstly, it reminds us that true purity isn't about creating more division more categories more us versus them Yeah, it's about breaking down those walls Recognizing our shared humanity and extending grace even to those we might consider our enemies So it's about moving beyond our comfort zones beyond our preconceived notions and opening ourselves up to the possibility of connection of Understanding exactly even with those who hold different views who come from different backgrounds and that's not always easy It takes humility courage and a willingness to listen to learn and to empathize But I think it's precisely in those spaces of discomfort those places where we're forced to confront our own Biases and prejudices that real transformation happens It's like those encounters those moments of genuine connection almost become these little glimpses of the heavenly holy of holies breaking into our world revealing the possibility of a different way of being a Different way of relating to one another that's a beautiful way to put it and it's a reminder that this journey towards purity It isn't a solitary pursuit, right? We need each other. We need that support, that encouragement, the accountability of a community to help us stay the course. So while that old sacrificial system of the temple has been replaced with the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, right? The idea of sacrifice itself hasn't disappeared. It's been transformed into something Deeper or something more meaningful. Absolutely.

The sacrifices we're called to make today are sacrifices of selflessness, compassion, forgiveness, standing up for justice, speaking truth to power. They're the sacrifices of choosing love over hate, hope over despair, unity over division, and those sacrifices, though

They're often invisible, have the power to change the world. They ripple outwards touching lives Transforming communities and ultimately creating a more just and compassionate society It's like each act of kindness each gesture of forgiveness each moment of genuine connection becomes a tiny thread woven into this larger tapestry of hope a Testament to the power of God's love to heal and restore this broken world So as we wrap up this deep dive into the book of Hebrews What are some key takeaways that our listeners can kind of carry with them? What are some practical steps they can take to embody this radical vision of purity in their own lives? I think the most important takeaway is that purity as Hebrews presents it isn't about following a set of rules or achieving some kind of moral perfection. It's about allowing ourselves to be transformed by the grace of God, by the sacrifice of Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that Transformations can manifest differently for each of us, right? There's no one-size-fits-all approach here exactly, but here are a few things we can all strive for. Okay, firstly, cultivate a heart of humility: be willing to acknowledge your own biases, your own prejudices. Yes, and to seek understanding rather than judgment.

Secondly, practice radical hospitality. Reach out to those who are different from you, listen to their stories, empathize with their struggles, celebrate their gifts. And lastly, remember that you are not alone on this journey. Seek out a community of like-minded individuals who can support you, challenge you, encourage you to live out your faith in meaningful ways. It's in those spaces you know those spaces of shared vulnerability, shared commitment, shared purpose where we find the strength and courage to embody this radical vision of purity, not just for our own benefit but for the good of the world. So as you go about your day your week your life Remember the message of Hebrews Remember that you have been made holy set apart for a purpose And that purpose is to be a bearer of God's love grace and transformative power in a world that so desperately needs it Let the words of Hebrews inspire you challenge you and empower you to live a life of purity purpose and radical love Thank you for joining us on this deep dive into the book of Hebrews

We hope you found it insightful and inspiring until next time keep seeking keep questioning and keep diving deep.