

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

6-min. Video Overview

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Alright, let's just jump right in. We're about to tackle a topic that can feel, well, pretty out there and super distant. This whole ancient idea of purity and pollution.

But what if I told you the logic behind all those old rules is actually something you and I can totally recognize in our own lives, right now? Let's see if we can decode it together. I mean, have you ever tried to read a book like Leviticus in the Bible? It's so easy to just feel completely lost, right? It's jam-packed with these rules that seem so bizarre and honestly just totally inaccessible to us today. The natural reaction for a lot of us is to just kind of shrug and say, well, that's just outdated and irrelevant.

Yeah, I mean, take this rule for instance. You can't wear a garment made with two different kinds of material. So no cotton polyblends? To us, that sounds completely random.

Like what could possibly be the reason for a rule like that? It honestly feels like it comes from another planet. But you know, before we get too judgy, let's maybe turn the mirror back on ourselves for a second. Our world is also governed by a whole set of unspoken rules about what's right and what's just, well, what's just plain wrong.

In fact, we live by our own kind of purity codes all the time, even though we'd never use that word. They're so deeply ingrained in us that we barely even notice they're there. Just think about it for a second.

We all know that dirt belongs outside in the garden, not on the living room carpet. That feeling is so strong. Or the thought of eating a dog or a cat.

For most of us, that's just repulsive, even though we can't really put a moral reason to it. We just instinctively pull back from things that we see as unclean or out of place. It's this really deep, powerful feeling.

And that right there gets us to the most important point. When we try to make sense of these ancient purity laws with our modern ideas about hygiene and germs, we are missing the point completely. The ancient concern wasn't about microbes.

It was about keeping everything in its proper place. About maintaining a divinely created cosmic order. Okay, so let's dig into that foundational idea.

Because once you get this core logic, the entire system starts to make a whole lot more sense. It's actually pretty amazing. This little phrase is basically the master key that unlocks the whole thing.

The ancient Israelite worldview was built on this one big idea. That God created a perfectly ordered universe. And humanity's job was to help preserve that order by keeping everything well, everything in its proper category, and in its proper place.

So when they talked about pollution, they weren't talking about being physically dirty. Pollution was about a boundary being crossed. It's the soil on the carpet.

It's a lobster that lives in the sea but walks on legs. It's a fluid that's supposed to be inside the body coming out. Anything that blurred the lines and threatened that perfect created order, that was pollution.

This whole worldview really operated on two main sets of categories. First up, you've got clean versus unclean. Now this is just about whether something is in its normal, proper state.

Or if it's somehow out of place. You could almost think of it as whole versus defective. Then the second pair is holy versus common.

This one isn't about good versus evil at all. Common is just the ordinary, everyday world we all live in. But holy, that refers to anything- a person, a place, even a specific day- that's been specially set apart for God.

And what's so wild is that this logic wasn't just some abstract philosophical idea. No. It was applied systematically to create this sort of map for all of reality.

It organized everything: people, spaces, time, even the food they ate. So for people, it was like these concentric circles of holiness. You had Gentiles, who were considered outside the whole system.

Then you had the Israelites, who were chosen by God, so they were clean but common. But then even within Israel, the tribe of Levi was set apart for temple service. And within that tribe, the priests were a family set apart even further.

And right at the very heart of it all was the high priest, the single most holy person in the entire nation. This map literally defined their whole social structure. And this social map is actually built physically into the architecture of the temple.

It was incredible. Your level of holiness determined exactly how close you were allowed to get to the presence of God. Gentiles could only go so far.

Then came Israelite women, and then men. Only the priests could go into the holy place, and only the high priest could enter the most sacred space of all, the holy of holies, and he could only do that once a year. And listen, violating these boundaries was not a small deal.

It had a name: encroachment, and it was seen as a defilement of holy space. I mean, it was considered so dangerous, so offensive to God's order, that it could literally be deadly. You just did not cross a line you weren't supposed to cross.

Time itself got mapped out this way too. The six workdays, that was just common time. But the seventh day, the Sabbath, that was set apart as holy time, a special space in the calendar that belonged to God.

And the same thing went for the big annual festivals. You know, like Passover? They were these sacred interruptions in the normal flow of the year. And you guessed it, the exact same logic applied to food.

Those dietary laws, they weren't really about health. They were about order. Animals had to fit perfectly into their created categories.

So a proper fish had to have fins and scales. A proper land animal had to chew the cud and have a split hoof. But something like a lobster- well, it lives in the water, but it walks on legs like a land creature.

That was a category error. It was mixing two different worlds. And that's what made it unclean.

And finally, the human body itself was seen as this little mini-map, a microcosm of the entire system. All the concern about its boundaries, you know, keeping the skin whole, controlling what goes in and what comes out. That was a powerful physical symbol for the bigger concern over the social and ethnic boundaries of the entire nation of Israel.

So you have to wonder, right, why? Why go through all this trouble with this elaborate mapping? What was the ultimate point of this whole super complex system? It definitely wasn't just about following rules for the sake of following rules. Well, first we have to get our heads around the fact that they just didn't separate life into moral laws and ritual laws like we tend to do. For them, a command to love your neighbor and a command not to plant two different kinds of seeds in the same field, they both came from the exact same divine source.

It was all part of one single unified instruction for how to live. And here's another really important piece of the puzzle. The goal wasn't to completely avoid becoming unclean.

I mean, that was just impossible. Things like childbirth, menstruation, coming into contact with a dead body. These were all totally unavoidable parts of life.

And they all made a person temporarily unclean. So the real point wasn't avoiding pollution. It was about managing it.

The whole system provided clear rituals and step-by-step processes for purification, for restoring order whenever it got disrupted. And all of this was absolutely essential for one huge reason. So they could safely maintain a relationship with a perfectly holy God who had actually chosen to live right there in their midst.

And that right there is the ultimate why. The entire system of purity and order and holiness, it was all a response to this one foundational command. Israel was called to reflect the very character of their God.

Because God was holy, which meant perfectly ordered, totally distinct, and set apart. His people were supposed to structure their entire lives to mirror that very same holy order. So when we look back at these ancient laws, instead of just brushing them off as strange, maybe we can see them as this incredibly deep and meaningful attempt to build a world of order and holiness.

And that kind of leaves us with a question to think about, doesn't it? What are the invisible lines, the unspoken rules about what's clean, what's polluted, and what belongs where, that are quietly shaping our own lives today?