

Dr. David A. deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 8, Reading Hebrews -- Purity and Pollution 6-min. Video Overview

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Alright, let's jump right in. Today, we're going to tackle one of the most brilliant, but also one of the most dense, arguments in the entire New Testament. We're talking about the book of Hebrews and its totally game-changing ideas about purity, pollution, and how we can get close to God.

But before we get into all that, let's just start with a really big question. I mean, forget about ancient texts for a second. Just imagine: what if you, yes, you, could walk right into the most sacred, most holy, most powerful place in the entire universe? Well, the author of Hebrews comes along and makes this absolutely wild claim: that this isn't some fantasy.

He says it's a real possibility. And in this breakdown, we're going to see exactly how he builds that incredible case, step by step. Now, to really get what Hebrews is doing, we have to first understand the world it was arguing with.

And this was a world that was just built on boundaries. A world where your access to God was literally a map with lines you could not cross. And it's so important to get our heads around what they meant by purity.

This wasn't about being clean in the way we think about it, you know, like taking a shower. It wasn't even just about being a good person. It was about being in the right state, having ritual fitness to even come near the raw, overwhelming presence of God.

The temple in Jerusalem was the perfect picture of this. Think of it like a series of gates, each one leading to a more holy space. Most people could only get into the outer courts.

The priests could go one level deeper. But the very center, the Holy of Holies, the place where God's presence was focused, only one guy, the high priest, could go in there, and only on one single day of the year. It was a physical map of spiritual distance.

Okay, so these huge ideas in Hebrews, they didn't just drop from the sky. The early Christians were already starting to redraw some of these ancient maps. They were already challenging the old boundaries.

And the first big wall to come crashing down was the one that separated Jew from Gentile. You see it right here in this quote. The idea was that this massive dividing wall was being demolished to create something totally new.

So the whole game was changing. The lines that decided who was in and who was out were shifting. It was no longer about your ethnicity, or what you ate, or whether you were circumcised.

A new community was forming, a holy community, and the boundary line was now based on belief. But Hebrews looks at that change and takes it a hundred steps further. The author argues that the entire earthly system- the temple, the priests, all the sacrifices, the whole thing was limited because it was just a shadow, a copy of something much, much bigger.

The author zeroes in on this detail from the book of Exodus, where God tells Moses to build everything according to the pattern he was shown on the mountain. And their interpretation is, whoa, they say Moses didn't just see a blueprint. He saw the real thing in heaven.

And the one he built on earth, that was just a model. But wait a minute, that raises a pretty obvious question, right? If God gave these instructions for the earthly temple, why wasn't it good enough? What was the problem? And the logic here is just razor sharp. The author says the proof that the old system wasn't the final answer was the fact that it had to be repeated over and over and over again, every day, every year.

The author basically asks, look, if these sacrifices actually fixed the problem for good, why would you keep having to do them? And when you put the two systems side by side, the contrast is just incredible. The old sacrifices, they dealt with external stuff, making you ritually clean on the outside. The new one, it's about cleansing your conscience, your inner self.

The old had to be done constantly, which proved they were temporary. The new one was once for all, which proves it's permanent. It's a total upgrade across the board.

So this is where it all comes together. This is the author's real masterstroke. They take the single most important, most sacred ritual in all of Judaism, the day of atonement or Yom Kippur, and they reimagine it as a cosmic event that happened through Jesus.

So let's just quickly walk through how this day worked. It was this intense, sacred drama. The high priest had to first offer a sacrifice for his own sins.

Then he'd go into the Holy of Holies to purify the space itself. Then he'd sacrifice for the people's sins. Sins were symbolically placed on a scapegoat that was driven out into the wilderness.

And finally, the animal carcasses were taken outside the camp and burned. Now, this part is so, so important. The author of Hebrews isn't saying that Jesus literally reenacted this with, you know, goats in heaven.

They are using the powerful structure of this ritual as a metaphor, as a way to unlock the deeper meaning of what happened in Jesus's death and his entry into heaven. And when you see the parallels they draw, it's pretty stunning. The high priest had to offer a sacrifice for himself first, but Jesus, being sinless, doesn't need to.

The priest enters an earthly room. Jesus enters heaven itself. The animal remains were burned outside the camp.

Jesus suffers outside the city gate. And just like everyone waited for the priest to come back out to know the sacrifice was accepted, the author frames Jesus's future return as that final re-emergence. I mean, the text makes it crystal clear.

This wasn't about entering a copy, a building made by people. This was about entering heaven itself, the real thing to stand in God's presence for us. So that is some seriously deep theology.

But what's the point? Why does it matter? Well, the author immediately pivots to what this means for how we're supposed to live right here and right now. It all boils down to this one simple number. One.

A single, perfect, once and for all offering accomplished what thousands and thousands of animal sacrifices never could. Direct, unblocked, permanent access to God. And the result of that, the author calls it boldness.

All that fear, all that distance, all those barriers and concentric circles, they're gone. Instead, there's this confidence to enter the holy place, not a building on earth, but the actual presence of God. So if the old sacrifices are obsolete, is there anything left to offer? You bet.

The author just completely redefines what a sacrifice is. It's not about animals anymore. The new sacrifices are things like praising God, doing good for others, and sharing what you have.

That's what pleases God now. And all of this leads to this really profound ethical shift. The old central command, be holy, was often about separation, about putting up walls to protect your purity.

But now that gets transformed. The new ethic is be merciful. It's a move away from defense and towards active, compassionate engagement with the world.

And that's what this ancient text kind of leaves us with. It blew up the old maps of who was in and who was out, what was clean and what was unclean. And it makes us ask right now, in our world, in our own lives, which of the lines that we draw to separate us from them, which of those purity lines need to be completely erased? And maybe which ones, protecting the things that are truly sacred, need to be drawn even stronger?