

Holiness: A Queer Concept

1. Warm-up Question: Ancient notions of holiness led to certain foods being declared “clean” or “unclean.” If God were to ask you to nominate one food that definitely should be deemed “clean” and another that definitely should be “unclean,” what two foods would you nominate? ☺
2. When you hear the word “holy,” do you have a positive or negative reaction – and why?
3. In modern English, the word “holy” is frequently defined as “spiritually perfect or pure; untainted by evil; sinless, saintly.” But that’s not what the Old Testament Hebrew word for “holy” – *quodes* [KO-desh] – meant. It meant “separate, remote, distant, different.” The core idea of *quodes* is captured in Isaiah 55:8, where God says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”
 - a. In what are some of the ways that God is utterly different from us and utterly incomprehensible?
 - b. *Quodes* does not refer to morality. Though God is clearly a supremely moral being, *quodes* does not refer to that attribute. *Quodes* speaks of God’s differentness. The same is true when the word is used for something other than God. For example, we might say that a candlestick on the altar is *quodes*, meaning it has been set apart for God’s service and, in that sense, is different from ordinary candlesticks. Can you think of an object or thing at home, church, or out-and-about that you would say is *quodes* in the Old Testament sense of the term?
4. In ancient times, people of faith began to wonder what it means to serve a holy God. They quickly concluded that, if we serve a holy God, we too should be holy. By the time Moses’ words were recorded in Leviticus 11, the Israelites had developed a very strong view of what it means to be holy. In Leviticus 11, the word “clean” is used as a synonym for “holy.” Read Leviticus 11:1-19.
 - a. In this reading, earth’s creatures were divided into three broad categories – land animals (i.e., quadrupeds), birds, and fish – and within each category, some were declared to be an “abomination” to God and, thus, “unclean.” The lists of “abominable” animals include rabbits, pigs, shellfish, storks, owls, eagles, and bats. How do you feel about that? Does it make sense to you to call something God created “an abomination?” Why or why not?
 - b. Historically, theologians have struggled to come up with a consistent explanation for why the Israelites designated certain animals as “unclean.” The most favored

explanation among scholars is captured in a quote from the Mercer Bible Dictionary, as excerpted on p. 3 below. Read the quote, then discuss.

- c. The way of thinking captured in the Mercer quote is called “Creation Order Theology.” The basic idea is that God created creatures in categories and creatures within each category were all intended to look and behave in certain normative ways. Therefore, any creature that departs from the norms for its category violates God’s creation order and is evil. Example:

Quadrupeds were meant to walk, not fly.
Bats are quadrupeds that fly.
Ergo: Bats are unnatural and unholy.

For an example of what happens when this way of thinking gets applied to people, read Leviticus 21:17-20, then discuss this question: Why is Creation Order thinking dangerous, especially when applied to people?

- d. What happens when Creation Order thinking is applied to LGBTQ people?
 - e. Where does Creation Order thinking come from within its advocates? What motivates it?
5. The good news is that Jesus completely rejected Creation Order thinking. Read Mark 7:1-23.
- a. This chapter begins with a back-and-forth between Jesus and the Pharisees about their obsession with eating food in ways that are ritually “clean.” This is the only place in the Gospels where Jesus gets so worked up, he actually summons a crowd so he can say something. Why do you think Jesus got so worked up?
 - b. The very end of vs. 19 says, “Thus Jesus declared all foods clean.” In other words, the argument Jesus makes in the latter half of this passage (vss. 14-23) represents a complete rejection of the “Creation Order” rationale behind Leviticus 11. How would you summarize the argument Jesus makes.
 - c. What happens when Jesus’ argument gets applied to LGBTQ people? What conclusion does it lead to?
 - d. How do the teachings of Jesus in Mark 7 undermine the argument that “God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve?”
 - e. Based on what Jesus teaches in Mark 7, is it a good thing or bad thing when a creature looks or behaves in a way that is atypical for its “category” – as for example when a quadruped has wings (bat), or a bird swims and dives like a fish (stork), or a man loves another man instead of a woman (or vice versa)?

- f. Jeff closed Sunday's sermon with a statement found on p. 3 below. Read the statement, then discuss the following question: Are you proud of who God created you to be? On a scale of 1 to 10, how proud are you?

Supplement to Question 4b: Mercer Bible Dictionary Quote, p. 505

“These rules [about unclean foods] have been explained as early notions of hygiene and health, as allegories, or simply as preferences of taste. [But none of these explanations seems to work consistently. Instead, the] key probably is the one stated in the rules themselves: the rules are for keeping Israel holy. . . .

Among the animals of Leviticus 11, the unclean are those of mixed or confused identity: if for example birds typically fly and quadrupeds walk, a quadruped that flies – the bat (vs. 19) – is perceived as having a confused identity; it is unclean. The birds listed as unclean swim or dive or in some other way do not behave like birds. . . . The principle is clear: the animal perceived as ‘ordered’ has its holiness and is clean; the animal having blurred identity is contaminated and to be avoided.”

When you read this quote, what thoughts, feelings, or insights arise within you?

Supplement to Question 5f: Quote from the End of the Sermon

“We serve a God who is holy – which, as we have seen, in its purest form means different, so it’s ok for you to be different too. As creation itself makes obvious, God revels in diversity. The same God who created the Finch and the Robin also created the more ambiguous birds once thought to be ‘unclean’ like the bat and even the eagle. Did you know that even the majestic eagle was considered an ‘abomination’ because it was different? I don’t know about you, but I’d rather be an eagle than a Finch. Take pride in whoever God created you to be.