

Leviticus 15

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It can be difficult for modern readers and students of the Bible to understand ancient taboos regarding sexuality and religion. In many of the cultures of antiquity around Israel, sex had a large role in cultic worship. For the people of God, this was not to be so. There was to be a separation of sexuality and worship of God. This is not to say that intimate relations between husbands and wives are inherently evil or sinful because they are not! It was a command of the Lord to Adam and Eve in the Garden to multiply and fill the earth prior to the Fall. Intimacy is not a result of the Fall but an instruction prior to it. In this chapter, Moses separates sexuality into bodily discharges and ritual purity of the Tabernacle. Humans are made in the image of God. Our bodies are essentially sacred and we have been called to be holy. Because of the sacredness of the human body and its potential for the creation of life, it was not possible to come into the presence of God, the ultimate source of life, without ritual cleansing. Intimacy was to remain in your own private dwelling and not performed before the Lord.

Many things caused the Israelites to be in a state of ritual uncleanness: touching dead things, going to war, contracting a disease and intimacy with your spouse to name a few. Uncleanness is not a state of sin. Conversely, holiness is also not inherently a state of sinlessness, although they are very closely connected. The uncleanness from skin diseases meant separation from the community, however, the uncleanness associated with bodily discharges does not require exclusion, only quarantine. Uncleanness can be transferred; Moses describes that people, clothing and objects such as chairs, beds and cutlery can become unclean through contact with the person with unusual bodily discharges. Should the discharge stop and the person be deemed clean then a seven-day ritual ceremony is begun, ending on the eighth day with ritual washing (baptism) and the sacrifice of birds. Once again we note that the ritual ceremony occurs after being cleansed and is not a magic formula to make one clean. The priest prepares the sacrifices as a sin offering and burnt offering and pronounces atonement before the Lord for the cleansed man. We note again that atonement is pronounced, not forgiveness, as there is a difference between these concepts.

Differentiating between the pure and unclean has been the topic for four chapters now (Lev 12-15). Purity is important to the Lord. Verse 31 perhaps gives us the reason. In this verse, God instructs Moses to keep the Israelites separate from uncleanness. Why? So that they will not die for defiling His sanctuary. Failing to acknowledge and deal with impurity results in a disregard for the holiness of God and potential death. What type of death is implied? Well, it could be a physical one such as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Or it could be a spiritual death as in the case of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit.

The early Jesus movement (what we call early Christianity) struggled with sexual immorality in the Gentile culture. Acts 15 noted four laws for Gentiles including the prohibition against fornication. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians described how immorality defiled the body, something that was sacred had become unclean, and the prescription was exclusion from the community. Uncleanness and immorality are contagious. In our modern culture of unrestrained sexual promiscuity, it is a challenge for the people of God to remain holy and pure. We have a responsibility to educate our children in appropriate and pure attitudes to intimacy. This will not be done by the secular education system which knows no distinction between the sacred and the profane.