

**More than 99 and 44/100% Pure**  
[Lev 12:1-4; 13:1-3; 15:1-3, 16, 19, 31-33]

## **Introduction**

Our chapel theme this trimester, as you know, is "Here am I Lord ... Purify me." I intended to ignore this theme, as I have past chapel themes, and just preach on whatever text the Lord prompted (forgive me chaplain, I obviously need to make an appointment for confessional). **However**, this year, the theme has grasped hold of me and won't let go. The Spirit has pressed upon me our focus on "purity." So much so, that I have been bathing all trimester with "Ivory" soap, which we all know is 99 and 44/100<sup>ths</sup> percent pure!

I read recently that Ivory's slogan claiming such purity originated in the 1800's when Harley Proctor, of Proctor and Gamble, coined the phrase after the soap was analyzed by college chemistry professors and independent laboratories. The results demonstrated that the ingredients in a bar of ivory soap which were **not** identified as "pure-soap" totaled 56/100<sup>ths</sup> percent. Proctor subtracted this from 100 and derived the slogan "99 and 44/100<sup>ths</sup> percent pure."

So, does the Bible care that much about purity? How pure does God wish for us to be? As Christians are we more than 99 and 44/100<sup>ths</sup> percent "pure"?

## **I. Concern for Purity in the Bible**

There are a number of texts in the Bible related to purity or images of purity. I was surprised to discover that there is a significant strand of discussion related to purity which focuses on giving one's best and committing every aspect of life to God. I had assumed, as our chapel theme implies, that our cry, "Purify me," would result in God alone doing a cleansing work which would remove all my imperfections and make me clean. Meanwhile, I should simply sit still, as if a small child being scrubbed in the tub by mother. Like Isaiah holding still while the Seraphim touches the cleansing hot coal to his lips. In contrast, however, alongside God's miraculous work of cleansing, the Bible calls God's people to do the work of changing their conduct, and acting in ways which reflect purity. As we shall see, purity is closely associated with "holiness" and "life." As is often the case, the Bible does not end with merely "**being**" pure, but it presses us to "**doing**" that which makes us pure.

We are familiar with the metaphor of the "refiner's fire" which is used to separate and purify precious metals such as silver and gold. In Malachi 3:2-4, we read of the messenger of the Lord who will purify the worship of the children of Israel. Like a refiner's fire and a fullers' soap (the first Ivory soap?), the messenger of the Lord will cleanse the worship of the children of Israel. The concern expressed here is for right sacrifices and offerings which are pleasing to the Lord. Earlier, in Malachi 1, the prophet judged the descendants of Levi, or the priests, for offering polluted sacrifices to the Lord. They were accused of bringing blemished, blind, lame, and sick animals for sacrifice. To correct this, the messenger of the Lord "will purify the priests so that they may present to the Lord offerings of righteousness." The work of God **in** his people results in the good work of righteousness **by** his people.

Another image of purity is reflected in the Law of God by the somewhat cryptic prohibitions against mixing things. Leviticus 19:19 forbids the mixing of two kinds of cattle, two kinds of seed in your field, and two kinds of material in your clothing. A similar passage in Deut 22:9-11 forbids sowing two kinds of seed in your vineyard, plowing with an ox and donkey together, and wearing material mixed with wool and linen. In our society, where hybrids, compounds, and synthetics are all the rage, the command **not** to mix things seems, not only archaic, but unreasonable. Nevertheless, in Leviticus, this instruction appears in the midst of legislation under the heading, "You shall be **holy**, for I the Lord your God am **holy**" (Lev 19:2). Two weeks ago, Dr. Powers highlighted for us this same connection between purity and holiness, in relation to Peter's quote of this very passage. Therefore, I feel I am in good company in recognizing this connection (I mean, of course, both Peter and Dr. Powers)!

As a representative system, the sacrificial laws and the impurity regulations point beyond themselves to foundational values which are directly applicable to all of us. Though we do **not** slaughter animals for offerings, and we are **not** concerned with segregating kinds of cattle and types of seed, or with ensuring that our clothing consists of only one type of fabric; **we should be** concerned with the underlying intent of these very laws. The intent of animal sacrifice is another sermon. For this message, we need to recognize that the prohibitions against mixing things reflect a concern for purity. The medieval Jewish commentator, Abravanel, wrote in regard to these prohibitions, "I, the Lord, being One in My every aspect, detest all such combinations of opposites—so how can you wish to combine hatred with love?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Carasik, ed., *Leviticus* (The Commentators' Bible: The JPS Miqra'ot Gedolot; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), 150-51.

Abravanel refers to the oneness of God in the sense of being uncontaminated, uncorrupted, untainted, or undiluted. That is, God is pure and holy! Likewise, as previously quoted from Lev 19:2, God calls his people to be holy, uncontaminated, uncorrupted, untainted, undiluted. In other words, God calls us to be unmixed and therefore pure! The biblical laws against mixing things reflect this concern for purity of life and character.

This intention is more obvious in relation to the prohibitions against worshipping God "on every high hill and under every green tree," as expressed in Deuteronomy 12. The command to worship God only "at the place which the Lord God chooses" is intended to keep Israel from **mixing** their worship of God with the idolatry of her neighbors. Accordingly, Israel was to avoid worshipping God "on every high hill and under every green tree" because those are the places where the nations served their false gods and offered sacrifices to their idols (Deut 12:2). It is easy to recognize that the concern here is to keep the worship of God **pure**, and **unmixed** with idolatry.

It is evident that the intent of these commands exhorts us to an uncompromising and wholehearted pursuit of holiness, reflecting a pure unmixed commitment to God. The intent of the law does not allow us to mix righteousness and wickedness in the same life. It does not allow us to mix kind words and profanity. It does not allow us to mix literature and pornography. It does not allow us to mix marriage and infidelity. It does not allow us to mix . . . (you fill in the blank). It does not allow us to live two lives, one sacred and the other profane. Rather, the intent of the law presses us to invite God into every realm of our being. This is reflected in another set of obscure, and seemingly irrelevant, regulations; that is, the impurity laws of Leviticus 12-15.

## II. Victory of Life Over Death

The impurity laws of Leviticus might be considered among the "hard sayings or hard passages of the Bible." They speak of semen, menstruation, blood, and disease. At least the Bible doesn't talk about sex. . . . Oh, there is the Song of Songs! --Well, at least that is another sermon. For the church today, the impurity laws may be considered extraneous, repugnant, and even bizarre. They remind us that God's written revelation in the Bible was originally inspired in the context of ancient and superstitious societies. Though Old Testament laws reflect such an environment, God's rendering of this legislation strips from them all vestiges of pagan aberration, and invests them with God's message and God's values. That is the key to understanding the impurity laws, and in fact, the entire sacrificial system.

God's revelation came in the context of an Ancient Near Eastern society drowning in antiquated superstition, primitive ritual, and archaic trepidation. Instead of ignoring that culture, God provided legislation which acknowledges and even reflects its mentality, but divests it of all pagan belief, and re-forms it with God's theological message.

With this in mind, we can pursue our chapel theme related to **purity**, by discovering the theological concern embedded in the laws governing **impurity**. Regarding the impurity system in the Bible, Jacob Milgrom has written:

Some benign skin diseases are diagnosed and quarantined, passing by the spate of known contagious diseases. Genital discharges are declared impure but not issues from other orifices. These are the subjects of the impurity laws . . . They sound bizarre. But as symbols they reveal deeper, basically ethical values that remain relevant to this day.<sup>2</sup>

Identifying the theology behind the impurity laws has been a challenge for scholars for centuries. Most explanations treat the impurity laws of the Bible as remnants of pagan influence, as if tolerated by God within God's greater written revelation. Accordingly, we find interpretations based on a need for order and wholeness in the face of a mixed and unmanageable creation; or the threat of supernatural powers emanating from unclean objects or persons; or ancient taboos reflecting the fears of an ignorant society seeking to appease a pantheon of gods through ritual acts. Such discussions attempt to link these understandings to some theological construct consistent with the character of God, but ultimately fall short. I am indebted to one of my teachers, Rabbi Dr. Jacob Milgrom, for his penetrating insight into the ethics and theology of the sacrificial system, including the impurity laws. The rationale behind the impurity laws expressed in the rest of this message is founded upon his illumination of the biblical text.

Imagine all the items we might include in a list of things labeled "impure" or "unclean." Such a list might include: mud, dirt, pigs, spiders, snakes, skunks, mosquitoes, trash, clumps of wet hair pulled out of the drain, toe nails, belly button fuzz, tofu (although I assure my wife, I would never include tofu in the list), red meat (yeah, I would put that on the list), eggplant, bacteria, viruses, disease, manure, etc. If we took the time, I am sure we could create a very lengthy list.

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 101.

In light of this, however, it is most revealing that the list of items labeled unclean within the biblical impurity laws is limited to only three sources: a human corpse or animal carcass, scale disease, and genital discharges. This is actually quite astounding when we consider that, of the many known contagious diseases in the ancient world, only a few types of scale disease are labeled impure. Also, of all the secretions of the human body, including mucus, perspiration, and especially urine and feces, only genital discharges are labeled impure in the biblical impurity laws. In contrast, Israel's neighbors in the ancient world identified all sorts of items among their impurity taboos; including cut hair and nails in Persia and India, and a newborn with its mother in Greece and Egypt.

So, in God's legislation, why is impurity limited to only these three sources: a human corpse or animal carcass, scale disease, and genital discharges? The answer lies in the one common denominator reflected in all three sources of impurity. That is, the concept of "death." Obviously a corpse and a carcass reflect death.

A genital discharge from a male involves semen, and from a female involves vaginal blood whether from menstruation or following childbirth. Semen and vaginal blood represent forces of life, and their loss represents death. Semen is readily recognized as a source of life. Therefore its loss represents the loss of potential life, and thereby reflects death. Blood is explicitly linked to life in the Bible, as reflected in the following texts:

**Genesis 9:3-4** Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as *I gave* the green plant. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, *that is*, its blood. (NASB)

**Leviticus 17:11** For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement. (NASB)

**Deuteronomy 12:23** Only be sure not to eat the blood, for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh. (NASB)

Vaginal blood is related all the more to life, as its flow after childbirth and during menstruation are clearly associated with the reproduction of life.

The types of scale disease labeled impure in the Bible reflect the appearance of approaching death. The wasting away of the body is the common characteristic of the highly visible form of scale disease which is labeled impure in the Bible. It symbolizes the process of death. Accordingly, when Miriam is afflicted with scale disease (often translated leprosy), Moses prays, "Oh, do not let her be like one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes from his mother's womb!" (Num 12:12).

Leviticus 13 and 14 include moldy fabrics and fungous houses as impure, not because they have scale disease, but because they give the appearance of it, that is, the same appearance of decay and death.

Like the sacrificial system, the impurity laws are representative in nature. The impurity laws symbolize elements which reflect death. Their purpose is to remind Israel of the sanctity of life! The purpose of the symbolic impurity system is to remind Israel of the divine imperative to reject death and choose life. It is the same imperative presented in Moses' famous sermon near the end of Deuteronomy. Notice the repetition of the words "life" and "live" (7 times) in this excerpt from Moses' speech:

**Deuteronomy 30:15-16, 19-20** I have set before you today **life** and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may **live** and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. . . . I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you **life** and death, the blessing and the curse. So **choose life** in order that you may **live**, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your **life** and the length of your days, that you may **live** in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them. (NASB)

In relation to the impurity laws, Milgrom writes:

Although the loss of vaginal blood and semen is a necessary part of the human cycle, its symbolic value, representing the loss of life, is a process unalterably opposed by Israel's God, the source of its life: "you shall keep my laws and my norms, by the pursuit of which men shall **live**: I am YHWH."<sup>3</sup>

Impurity and holiness are antonyms. Impurity is associated with death, while holiness stands for life. Accordingly, in this symbolic impurity system, holiness and life overcome impurity and death. The system represents the victory of life over death! It should be easy for us, as Christians, to recognize in the impurity laws an expression of God's commitment to resurrection and life!

### III. Foundation of Relationship

In this symbolic system, impurity further represents that which has potential to interfere with relationship to God, including neglect of that relationship. The impurity system serves as a constant reminder to maintain relationship with God. God seeks to be involved in every aspect of our lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 123.

Even the most private, mundane, irritating, and embarrassing aspects of our being, such as seminal emissions and menstrual cycles, are subject to our relationship with God.

We have a calendar in our bathroom from some ministry group, and the quote for October reads: "Nothing is too big, too little, or too dirty to talk to God about." Similarly, there is that point in every child's life when they realize that they are too old to be seen naked in front of Mom or Dad any longer. When the naked child hides from Mom and yells at her for passing by the line of vision as she goes about her work, the child may be met with the response, "I gave birth to you and you don't have anything I haven't seen before." In relationship to God, we may need to remind ourselves that He is our creator; He knows how our bodies function; He made them this way. It may seem obtrusive, but our creator wants to be involved in every aspect of our being. The impurity laws remind us to stop in the midst of the most tedious elements of life and acknowledge God, and recognize his grace even in places which, and at times when, we would rather be left alone. This is the epitome of "praying without ceasing."

## **Conclusion**

This brings us back to our theme of purity, in terms of pure commitment to relationship with God. Nothing is to be left out of our relationship to God. He does not want **just** 99 and 44/100<sup>ths</sup> percent of us, He wants all 100 percent of our being, and He wants it pure and unmixed; He wants no compromise or distraction. Even with respect to those areas of life which are so personal and wearisome that we don't want to share them with anyone, God wants to be involved.

I am sure we are grateful that we are not required to bring animal sacrifices and undergo ritual bathing, and perform extra washings of our clothes every time we find ourselves in a situation which might be deemed impure. Nevertheless, we should allow such times to continually remind us of God's precious gift of life; we should be grateful for breathe itself; we should act with reverence for life! And, in the midst of life's most mundane moments, we should stop and acknowledge our gracious creator, and seek ways to enrich this foundational relationship of our existence.