BE HOLY, BECAUSE I AM HOLY

Leviticus 11:1-47

Key Verse: 45

“I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.”

Chapters 1-10 are related to the altar on which the offerings were made for sinners to come to God, who is holy. This is an essential part of the Israelites whom God had chosen as his holy people. Chapters 11-15 are related to the people’s practical life. Particularly, chapter 11 is about eating matter, what they are to eat and not to eat. God gave them a clear dietary law with detailed regulations so that they might know who they are. In their daily matter of eating, God wanted them to be reminded of their identity as the holy people of God, set apart from the rest people of the world. Whenever they ate, they would remember their identity as those belonging to the LORD who brought them out of Egypt and is holy. What a wisdom of God! Of course all these food regulations do not apply to us, since Jesus declared that all food “clean” (MK 7:19). However, the spirit of this chapter with 47 verses is applicable to those who have been redeemed by Christ, called out of this world. It seems that in our time many Christians live without awareness of who they are, and their spirit is just mingled with the spirit of this world. Daily remembrance of our identity definitely affects our daily life. May we deeply understand the spirit of this chapter.

Chapter 11starts with these words, “The LORD said to Moses and Aaron.” Now God recognizes Aaron’s authority as the priest and spoke to both Moses and Aaron. In verses 1-23, God specified what they are to eat among land animals, the living creatures in the water of the seas and the streams, birds and flying insects. In verses 2 and 3, “Say to the Israelites: ‘Of all the animals that live on land, these are the ones you may eat. You may eat any animal that has a split hoof completely divided and that chews the cud.” Then there is the list they are not to eat. Verse 4 says, “There are some that only chew the cud or only have a split hoof, but you must not eat them.” They are the camel, the coney and the rabbit that chew the cud, but do not have a split hoof, and the pig that does have a split hoof completely divided, but does not chew the cud. For each of the cases it is written, “it is unclean for you.” The reason they are not to eat them is that they are unclean. We don’t know why they are unclean, but God said, “It is unclean for you.” Probably the Egyptians ate all those unclean animals freely. When the Israelites were in Egypt, they were slaves who were just hungry most of the time and consumed any food before them. In the desert, God rained manna from heaven. But when they enter the promised land of Canaan, they should not just follow the eating style of the Canaanites, but follow God’s dietary law, knowing that they are different, set apart for God. It is written in Deuteronomy 14:3-5, “Do not eat any detestable thing. These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, the deer, the gazelle, the roe deer, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain sheep.” It seems that they were to eat gentle grass-feeding animals, but not the animals that just devour food as predators. God gave clear instructions regarding food here and sex later on in chapters 18-20. The point is that they should not follow the custom of the nations. And here verse 8 says, “You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you.” We will think about the carcasses later.

In verses 9 and 12 it says, “Of all the creatures living in the water of the seas and the streams, you may eat any that have fins and scales. But all creatures in the seas or streams that do not have fins and scales—whether among the swarming things or among all the other living creatures in the water—you are to detest. And since you are to detest them, you must not eat their meat and you must detest their carcasses. Anything living in the water that does not have fins and scales is to be detestable to you.” Here “detest” or “detestable” is written 4 times. “Detest” seems to be a strong expression, but God’s description is clear at this point, what to eat or not to eat among the living creatures in the water. Those that have fins and scales always move and sometimes swim against the flow. They are fresh and really living. The people can eat eat those fish, but not lobsters, octopus, shrimps, or oysters, which some people really like. We don’t know why, but God says, “those that do not have fins and scales are detestable”.

And in verse 13 it says, “These are the birds you are to detest and not eat because they are detestable.” And then God lists 20 birds they are not to eat, beginning with the eagle and including two kinds of vultures, two kinds of kites, any kind of ravens, the gull, any kind of hawk, six kinds of owls, the cormorant, the osprey, the stork, any kind of heron, the hoopoe and the bat. Wow! Psalm 50:11 says, “I know every bird in the mountains…” To me, the list of the birds shows God’s delicate love for his chosen people. God does not want them to be unclean by any of them. God is like a mother who is delicately concerned about her babies. We also remember Jesus’ words, “Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Mt 10:30; Lk 12:7).

In verses 20-23 it says, “‘All flying insects that walk on all fours are to be detestable to you. There are, however, some winged creatures that walk on all fours that you may eat: those that have jointed legs for hopping on the ground. Of these you may eat any kind of locust, katydid, cricket or grasshopper. But all other winged creatures that have four legs you are to detest.” It is interesting that they can eat those that have joined legs for hoping on the ground or jointed legs above their feet with which to jump on the earth (NASB). What an expression! Christians are those who do not just walk on the ground attached to the earth only, but those who jump on the earth towards heaven, the higher ground. It is as a hymn song says (Higher Ground, 467), “Lord, lift me up and let me stand, By faith, on heaven’s table-land. A higher plane than I have found—Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”

Now verse 24 says, “You will make yourselves unclean by these; whoever touches their carcasses will be unclean till evening.” In this passage, the word “carcass” or “carcasses" is written 14 times among 24 times in the whole Bible. The uncleanness comes from the dead body. Touching the carcasses makes people unclean. It is understandable when think that death was the result of sin.

And they are not to eat the animals that move about the ground, which is written 6 times (29, 31, 41, 42, 44, 46). In cursing the serpent in whose form the devil or Satan appeared (Rev 12:9), God said in Genesis 3:14, “Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.” Particularly verse 29 says, “Of the animals that move about on the ground, these are unclean for you: the weasel, the rat, any kind of great lizard, the gecko, the monitor lizard, the wall lizard, the skink and the chameleon.” We wonder why nowadays many children’s toys have these kinds of weird images of such creatures. In their childhood, such images would be engraved in their minds. We are to know that truly the work of the devil is strategic and rampant. Parents should have discernment and raise their children differently as those set apart for God.

It is also written in verse 36, “A spring, however, or a cistern for collecting water remains clean, but anyone who touches one of these carcasses is unclean.” Lots of water cannot be contaminated. And in versed 37 and 38, “If a carcass falls on any seeds that are to be planted, they remain clean. But if water has been put on the seed and a carcass falls on it, it is unclean for you.” There is a difference between the dry seed and the wet seed when the carcass falls on them. The uncleanness on the dry seed can be absorbed in the soil of the ground, but not on the wet seed. Again, the LORD God is so specific and delicate.

Now in verse 44, The LORD says, “I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.’” In chapter 8, we learned that the sprinkling of the blood and the anointing of the oil consecrated the priests and the tabernacle and the altar. Here, we see that practical life according to the word of God consecrates us. Jesus said in Luke 8:21, “He replied, ‘My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice.” Paul also said in Philippians 4:9, “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice.”

Then verse 45 says, “I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.” The Decalogue starts with these words, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Ex 20:2). The expression “Brought you (up) out of Egypt” is written 28 times in the Bible. Their relationship with the LORD began through the LORD’s salvation from the bondage of Pharaoh in Egypt. They were slaves in Egypt for 430 years. But the LORD delivered and liberated them from such an impossible bondage. Through his act of God their relationship with the LORD God began. This is the ground of their relationship with the LORD. The LORD is the God of salvation. The LORD is the God of salvation and the holy God. He wants his people to be holy. Verse 47 says, “You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten.” Again the LORD God wanted them to be holy through the daily life of eating according his laws.

Then what can these words of God apply to us? First of all, we thank and praise God for Christ who redeemed us from the bondage of sin and death, and evil spirits and eternal condemnation and made us a people belonging to God. So Apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 1:15, 16, “Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’” Again Jesus declared all food “clean” (MK 7:19). Also, in Acts 10:15 the voice from heaven said to Apostle Peter, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” Apostle Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:4-5, “For everything God has created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.” However, the problem in our time is that people are so obsessed with food and sex to enjoy life to the maximum. “Eat love live” seems to be a kind of slogan of the people in our time. How to make delicious food and enjoy it seems to be people’s primary concern. They are consumed with delicacies. It seems that their god is the stomach as Paul said in Philippians 3:19. Yet, as for God’s people the purpose of eating is to be different. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” Eating together means having close relationship. With a thankful heart family members and the people in God’s community can eat together joyfully. And we are to eat with contentment. Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:6-7, “Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.”

And Paul said in Romans 14:20-21, “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother fall.” God’s people are to be mindful of other believers. And Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:13 says, “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.” What an attitude to value another’s faith more than his own appetite!

But God’s people should not just mingle with unbelievers and eat with them, except for evangelical purposes as Matthew invited his old tax-collector friends, sitting with Jesus and his disciples and eating together so that his old friends might know Jesus. And Jesus said in Luke 14:12-14, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” This teaching of Jesus is not easy for all of us to put into practice, but these are the words of Jesus. We are living in the culture of “give and take”: you invited me one time, so I will invite you back one time, which is not necessarily bad. Yet we pray that God have mercy on us to have a genuine invitation in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Most importantly, God wants us to remember who we are whenever eat, as those redeemed and liberated by the blood of Christ and so be holy, set apart from this world with different purpose of eating and different manner of eating. It is because our LORD God is holy. Our God desires that his holiness may be permeated into his people through their daily life. Jesus said, “My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.” May we feed on Jesus daily as his chosen people, which can truly make us holy!