

## Welcome

Anyone else willing to confess to being a little... messy? I'm definitely a person who's comfortable with clutter... to a degree. But fairly regularly, I hit a point where I can't get any work done until I clean and organize my space - my room, my office, whatever. It's like I can't really think straight until everything is in its place.

As humans, we have an innate desire for order. Remember *Inside Out*? That Pixar movie that showed us the emotional interior of a person, where we met our 5 core emotions - Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger and... Disgust?

I was so confused the first time I saw that movie... how is Disgust an emotion, let alone a *core* emotion? But it turns out the psychologists behind the film are right. One of the most basic human experiences is disgust.

Most basically, disgust is a reaction to things that don't belong. We have strong disgust reactions to foods we don't like and dead smells. Psychologists tell us that our brains evolved to feel disgust at those things because they could be deadly to eat - poisonous or rotted.

But as we continued to develop, that emotion got transferred to other things too. Sometimes we feel disgust when we encounter people who aren't like us. Maybe they're dirty or have different ways of dressing than we do. So we feel disgust when we encounter them.

At its most insidious, this disgust can get turned into religious beliefs. We look down our nose at people who believe differently from us or have a different moral code. We treat them as dirty, sinful, less than.

That's not *just* something we came up with on our own. The Bible actually has a lot of laws and religious codes about who's clean and who's not. Who's holy and who's a sinner. Why are those divisions in there? What was God's purpose in delivering those to us? And, most importantly, if they're there, how do they help us love God and love our neighbors the way Jesus does?

## Message

This summer, we're putting *your* questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

A couple of principles are guiding our series:

Here at Catalyst, doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers.

Secondly, we're not trying to settle questions here. The goal of this series is to create conversation, not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

We began with questions about how we know God and God's will for us. Then we spent some time on hell and how God rescues us. Today, we've got a question that **hits at our experience of God's goodness**. Let's look at the questions guiding us today:

"Why is 'the life in the blood'? I've never understood the Hebraic symbolism and understanding of this. And why then are women considered 'unclean' and forbidden to enter sacred spaces while on their menstrual cycle?"

The other one doesn't seem to have much to do with the first, but we're going to connect them: "What is up with the Nephilim?"

(I know... a number of us don't even know what Nephilim are... don't worry. We'll get there.)

These questions are circling around a theological category that's really important for the whole of Scripture.

Clean vs Unclean.

You're probably most familiar with this from the kosher dietary code. Certain meats are kosher - clean, like beef, chicken, salmon. Others are unclean - like pork, shrimp and catfish. And along with that are other rules - like you can't eat meat and dairy in the same meal.

But clean and unclean goes further than that. Certain peoples are unclean - like Gentiles (non-Jewish people). People with physical deformities, chronic medical conditions or diseases were unclean. And people who had participated in certain behaviors were unclean - like burying a dead body or having sex (yes really!).

Blood is a big part of the clean/unclean dichotomy. Clean food has to be prepared so that it doesn't have any blood in it (which means your steaks are well-done). A kosher animal has been butchered in a particular way, to ensure all the blood has been drained away.

Open wounds make you unclean - because blood is outside the body.

And to that first question, women who are menstruating are unclean. Once they were finished menstruating, they had to wait seven days and then offer a small sacrifice to become clean again.

Women in ancient Israel, during that time of the month, started to stay in a tent that was set up outside the rest of the settlement or village.

(I want to point out that the Torah also marks men as unclean whenever we have an emission. But we only have to wait until the end of the following day to be clean again.)

So what's going on here? How is such a specific regulation of human bodies something that enables us to be God's people in the world?

Turn with us to [Leviticus 17](#).

Where we go wrong is when we assume that God set up this system based on some sort of universal laws that only God knows.

Take that conviction that life is in the blood for instance here in [Leviticus](#):

“And if any native Israelite or foreigner living among you eats or drinks blood in any form, I will turn against that person and cut him off from the community of your people, for the life of the body is in its blood. I have given you the blood on the altar to purify you, making you right with the LORD. It is the blood, given in exchange for a life, that makes purification possible. — [Leviticus 17:10-11](#)

The Torah offers us a world where the sacrificial system works because of an exchange of life. That life is contained in blood.

It's not hard to understand how ancient peoples got to that conclusion. You bleed too much, and you feel faint. You keep bleeding and you die.

In the pre-scientific ancient world, blood as life makes a lot of sense. So God works within that understanding to offer the people a framework they can understand.

The system of clean and unclean offers us a picture of a world where everything belongs, everything has a particular place. What makes something unclean is when it's out of place.

(So the animals, for instance - catfish are unclean because they don't have scales. Fish with scales are clean. Same with shrimp.)

Fluids are supposed to stay inside - leaky bodies are unclean bodies. Seriously - there's even a law that if an unclean person spits on you, you're unclean for the rest of the day too.

What's at the heart of the clean/unclean system is the conviction that the people of God are meant to embody in a literal way God's holiness and wholeness. God wants the world to be able to look at the people of God and see a reflection of the beauty and perfection God created all of us for. It's meant to be an invitation.

Now, if you're thinking to yourself at this point, "All that makes sense, but none of it makes sense. Because actually that system is pretty messed up. Those with disabilities or illnesses shouldn't be excluded because of a physical malady. People who have natural bodily emissions shouldn't be demonized or vilified for it!

You're right, of course.

And I think it's natural that we associate clean-ness with goodness and unclean-ness with being bad. But that's not how the ancient Hebrews thought about it. It's actually much more literal - being clean or dirty. If you come in from a hard day's work, you're covered with dirt and sweat, do people think you're evil? Of course not. But... they might also appreciate it if you shower before you sit down at the dinner table.

There's a similar line of thinking when it comes to the categories of clean and unclean, particularly when it comes to human bodies.

And don't worry if that all still seems weird. Remember we live in a very different culture, so it's okay if the way *they* saw the world seems strange to us. They would think we're pretty weird too.

What matters is that God came into their worldview and said, "I want to invite you to be my uniquely beautiful people, a people who becomes Good News to the whole world."

Friends, when we speak of God's holiness, this is always the bottom line. Because of God's great love for us, God invites us to be healed, made whole and join God in loving the world.

I know that's not how we often think of holiness, so can we pause here and turn to God in worship? Can we sing this good news into our hearts?

## Song

That ancient cultures understood holiness as a question of boundaries helps us make sense out of a lot of the way they told stories (and also how Jesus critiqued this same framework, which we're getting to next week!).

Turn with us to [Genesis 6](#).

Take the strange appearance of the Nephilim, which roughly translates to 'the Fallen Ones'. They get a shout out at the very beginning of Scripture. This is in a section of the Bible that is ancient near eastern mythology - it has strong parallels to the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Babylonian creation myth, as well as Egyptian and Canaanite mythologies. What that tells us is that a lot of the stuff - like the Nephilim - that get a lil shout-out here are actually part of a much larger collection of stories that would've been known to the people back then.

So fair warning: we don't know a lot about the Nephilim. Goliath (of 'David and' fame) may or may not have been one. What we do know is that they were a sign of bad times in the world. This passage comes from the lead-up to Noah's flood, and the Nephilim are presented as evidence that the world was wicked. It's the *why* that matters to us. Let's take a look:

Then the people began to multiply on the earth, and daughters were born to them. The sons of God saw the beautiful women and took any they wanted as their wives. Then the LORD said, "My Spirit will not put up with humans for such a long time, for they are only mortal flesh. In the future, their normal lifespan will be no more than 120 years." In those days, and for some time after, giant Nephilites lived on the earth, for whenever the sons of God had intercourse with women, they gave birth to children who became the heroes and famous warriors of ancient times. The LORD observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. — [Genesis 6:1-5](#)

Okay did you see that? The 'sons of God' are the Hebrew version of God's divine court. In the surrounding cultures, these were other gods. The Hebrews later came to understand them to be angels. Either way, they're divine. They came to earth and had sex with human women, and *their* offspring were the Nephilim. They had superhuman power of some kind.

This idea isn't unique to the Bible - far from it. The Nephilim (or Nephilites as the NLT calls them) are what the Greeks and Romans called demigods - half human and half divine. Hercules, Achilles and Helen of Troy were demigods. So was Cetewayo, the Zulu king and Moni-Mambu, the trickster of the Kongo people. Gilgamesh was a demigod. Even Samson might have been (the Hebrew is unclear).

So this idea that some particularly extraordinary people were half human and half divine was a common belief in the ancient world. And Genesis says it's bad news. Why? Because it's a

pollution of divine boundaries. The sons of god belong in the divine realm and earth is for humans. Only bad things happen when they mix.

Now again, there're about a million and six questions that spring from this observation. But what I hope you can see is that understanding clean/unclean as a central lens the ancient Hebrews used to understand the world offers some immediate clarity to some otherwise very strange texts. We don't have to *agree* with the dichotomy to *understand* it.

In fact, the New Testament understands Jesus' life and death to underscore the insufficiency of the system of clean/unclean. We're going to dive much deeper next week, but I want to close today with a passage from the letter to the Hebrews.

Hebrews is a sermon preached to a Jewish community following Jesus in the decades after his resurrection. They're feeling a strong pressure to return to the system of sacrifices, to the clean/unclean system Jesus transformed. The sermon is an extended encouragement to embrace the truly radical liberation Jesus has offered, and a big part of that encouragement is a deep critique of how the system of sacrifices to make us clean did not change as the world did. Listen to how the preacher of Hebrews frames it here:

The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship. If they could have provided perfect cleansing, the sacrifices would have stopped, for the worshipers would have been purified once for all time, and their feelings of guilt would have disappeared. But instead, those sacrifices actually reminded them of their sins year after year. For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. — [Hebrews 10:1-4](#)

The system was never going to be eternally effective because blood doesn't actually remove the impact and consequences of sin. (If you remember our message from a few weeks ago about atonement, this is what we're talking about here.)

Rather the system was meant to point those folks who lived in a world where life was in the blood and separation was necessary - to point them to the God who blows up all those systems.

God is always better than the religious systems that introduce us to God. God is always more radical than our institutions have room for.

God's holiness is not a barrier to keep us out. Rather, it's an invitation to join in God's healing of the world.

## Communion + Examen

Jesus isn't disgusted by you. He sets a place for you. Will you eat with him?

When in the last week have I drawn near to God or to others in love?

When have I allowed disgust to keep me from God or others?

When in this next week might disgust keep me from God or others?

How can I choose to express love as a way to connect with God or others this week?

## Assignment + Blessing