

Clean and Unclean Animals



**“To make a difference between the unclean
and the clean....” (Leviticus 11:47)**

CLEAN AND UNCLEAN ANIMALS

God, through Moses, told the nation of Israel:

“Thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth.” (Deut. 14:2)

Among the laws God gave to the Israelites are those that distinguish between the various beasts of the field, the fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea. A distinction is made between that which is proper and that which is not proper for them to eat.

“This is the law of the beasts, and of the fowl, and of every living creature that moveth in the waters, and of every creature that creepeth upon the earth:

“To make a difference between the unclean and the clean, and between the beast that may be eaten and the beast that may not be eaten.” (Lev. 11:46,47)

In considering the subject of clean and unclean animals, most people think these laws were given to the Israelites for reasons of health, sanitation, and cleanliness. And it is a known fact that there can be a health hazard with many of the beasts which are designated as unclean and, therefore, not fit to eat. For instance, the danger with the rabbit is tularemia, and with swine,

it is trichinosis. However, the health aspect is not the primary purpose of this study.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul utilized laws of the Old Testament to apply lessons to the Christian life. For example, he instructed the Christian not to be unequally yoked to an unbeliever, and he based this principle on an Old Testament law that prohibits harnessing together animals of unequal tread to plow a field (2 Cor. 6:14; Deut. 22:10). Thus Paul drew a spiritual analogy from the Law. He also said, “For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn” (1 Cor. 9:9; Deut. 25:4). He applied this law to Christian service, saying that under certain conditions, it is not improper for one who is active in the Lord’s service to partake of the temporal goods of other Christians in connection with that service (1 Tim. 5:17,18). Again the Law was the basis for teaching a spiritual lesson. In fact, Paul said, “Now *all these things* happened unto them [the Israelites] for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world [age] are come” (1 Cor. 10:11). The apostle was saying that the *primary* purpose of the Law of Moses was to teach lessons for the Christian. Accordingly, we can learn valuable spiritual lessons by examining the distinctions between clean and unclean animals as set forth in Leviticus chapter 11.

“Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, These are the beasts which ye shall eat among all the beasts that are on the earth.

“Whatsoever parteth the hoof, and is clovenfooted, and cheweth the cud, among the beasts, that shall ye eat.

“These are the beasts which ye shall eat: the ox, the sheep, and the goat,

“The hart, and the roebuck, and the fallow deer, and the wild goat, and the pygarg, and the wild ox, and the chamois [animals of the deer and goat families].

**“And every beast that parteth the hoof, and cleaveth the cleft into two claws, and cheweth the cud among the beasts, that ye shall eat.”
(Lev. 11:2,3; Deut. 14:4-6)**

For an animal to be considered clean, two characteristics are necessary: chewing the cud and parting the hoof. The spiritual lesson is that the Christian must also have two characteristics if he is to be “clean” in the Lord’s service.

The first characteristic, chewing the cud, pertains to partaking of the Word of truth and the flesh of the Redeemer. As the cow takes food into its stomach, so must the Christian “eat” the Word of God. When a cow chews rough grass, the food goes first into a preparatory stomach, which breaks down the coarse grass

into a condition that is more digestible. From there, the grass goes into a second stomach, where it is assimilated into the bloodstream. In other words, after collecting grass all day, the cow lies down and regurgitates what it has already swallowed and then chews the food again into a finer state for digestion into the bloodstream.

The digestion process indicates a characteristic that is very pleasing to the Lord, as illustrated in Acts 17:11. The Christians of Berea “were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word [of God by the mouth of Paul] with all readiness [and lowliness] of mind.” The Bereans had a receptive attitude and listened attentively. However, they did not just believe everything they heard but afterward examined and diligently considered whether Paul’s words properly applied to the principles inculcated in the Scriptures; that is, they wanted to see if his words were indeed true. Thus the Christian is to readily receive truth, spiritual food, and then later analyze and consider whether it is in harmony with the Word of God. When the answer is yes, that truth is to be made a part of the Christian life.

The second requirement for an animal to be considered clean is the parting of the hoof, that is, being cloven-footed or being cleft into two claws. Some animals have a very hard hoof that is parted into two sections, and some have fingers, more or less, or a

handlike extension. In any event, the hoof or leg has to be parted, either cloven-footed or divided into two segments. For the Christian, this means rightly dividing the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). The foot is the part of the body that carries a person to a destination; it pertains to one's walk in life. Thus the Christian, in his activity, must not only meditate on the Word of God but also use discrimination as to that which is proper. He must differentiate in connection with understanding truth. Why the *two* parts? If what is heard is truth, it will harmonize with the teachings of both the Old and the New Testaments.

While chewing the cud is similar in some respects, the thought of *intellectual* understanding is represented more by the foot of the animal, the dividing of the Word of truth in order to walk circumspectly. "Those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" have the correct "foot" or walk (Heb. 5:14). The food that is stored in the animal's stomach, to be later prepared for assimilation into the body, represents the application of truth into Christian conduct and life so that it becomes a part of the individual. Chewing pictures the meditation, rumination, and consideration of Christian doctrine and how it might become a part of one's character. Thus chewing the cud has to do with *moral and character development*, whereas the foot pertains to *intellectual discernment or enlightenment*.

Christians who examine the animals from these two standpoints will get many lessons.

The designation of an animal as either clean or unclean in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy does not mean that throughout Scripture, there is a certain harmony in that direction. In reading the accounts, we will ultimately see, for example, that the camel and the eagle are unclean for food, yet elsewhere in Holy Writ, they illustrate helpful and desirable characteristics for the Christian. Here the lion is an unclean animal, but based on another characteristic, Jesus is described as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah [who] ... hath prevailed” (Rev. 5:5). In fact, Jesus even used the serpent from the beneficial aspect of wisdom when he said, “Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Hence the helpful characteristics should not be confused with the unclean descriptions here in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which pertain primarily to food, both natural and spiritual.

Of course, as Christians, we are particularly interested in the spiritual lessons for the two characteristics possessed by clean animals, for they represent what God is looking for in His people. To be considered developed and mature, Christians must chew the cud and part the hoof, spiritually speaking. These two characteristics need to be analyzed further.

“Whatsoever parteth the hoof, and is clovenfooted, and cheweth the cud, among the beasts, that shall ye eat.

“Nevertheless these shall ye not eat of them that [only] chew the cud, or of them that [only] divide the hoof: as the camel, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof; he is unclean unto you.

“And the coney, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof; he is unclean unto you.

“And the hare, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof; he is unclean unto you.

“And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be clovenfooted, yet he cheweth not the cud; he is unclean to you.” (Lev. 11:3-7)

Because the camel, for example, chews the cud but does not have a divided hoof, it is an unclean animal. The same is true of the coney and the hare. Conversely, swine are unclean because they divide the hoof but do not chew the cud.

What is the spiritual lesson for chewing the cud but not dividing the hoof? Most Christians are polarized into one of two extremes or views in their concept of what it means to be a Christian. One view is that we must be Christians in a practical sense. Thus *living the Christian life* becomes the main focus to the neglect of the doctrinal and/or prophetic element of Scripture. The emphasis is on Christlikeness, and while this is essential and the

Scriptures so teach, some Christians mistakenly think that their primary purpose is moral works and their conduct in life. As a result, they are relatively careless in using discernment of mind, in rightly dividing the Word of truth, and in exercising discretion. They emphasize the development of the graces of the Spirit to the neglect of dividing the hoof, that is, doctrinal study, whereas God is looking for *both* characteristics in the Christian: growth *in grace and in knowledge*. In fact, they are companion characteristics. In order to grow in grace, one must grow in knowledge, and in order to grow in knowledge, one must have previously taken a step of grace.

What is the spiritual lesson of dividing the hoof but not chewing the cud? Swine represent Christians who are interested in doctrinal development and who exercise discrimination in head knowledge, but they do not apply Christian doctrine to their moral life. In the Scriptures, swine picture those who grovel in the mire of sin. If a Christian, who has become enlightened, returns to his former habits in the world, he is likened to the washed sow that returns to wallowing in the mud or the baser elements of earth (2 Pet. 2:22). Thus the swine characteristic of Christians is to emphasize the importance of knowledge but to neglect the proper application of that knowledge in the Christian life; that is, they do not change their swinelike disposition and their depraved tastes

for the baser passions of life. It is a mistake to expect to grow in knowledge without a corresponding growth in grace.

Leviticus chapter 11 also categorizes marine life, fish, as clean and unclean.

“These shall ye eat of all that are in the waters: whatsoever hath fins and scales in the waters, in the seas, and in the rivers, them shall ye eat.

“And all that have not fins and scales in the seas, and in the rivers, of all that move in the waters, and of any living thing which is in the waters, they shall be an abomination unto you:

“They shall be even an abomination unto you; ye shall not eat of their flesh, but ye shall have their carcasses in abomination.

**“Whatsoever hath no fins nor scales in the waters, that shall be an abomination unto you.”
(Lev. 11:9-12)**

Here the same principles are applied, but they are adapted to marine or aquatic life. Fins, which steer fish through the waters and are related to their propulsion and direction, correspond to the divided hooves of an animal. Just as feet take an animal to a destination, so the fins of the fish are its means of locomotion. Therefore, the fins represent rightly dividing the Word of truth. Overlapping scales around the body of the fish are like armor in appearance. Being close to the body, they are comparable to the

breastplate of righteousness of the Christian (Eph. 6:14). Scales correspond to chewing the cud and thus represent the application of truth in the life of the individual—truth that becomes a part of the Christian.

The next category in Leviticus chapter 11 is birds of the air.

“And these are they which ye shall have in abomination among the fowls; they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination: the eagle, and the ossifrage, and the ospray,

“And the vulture, and the kite after his kind;

“Every raven after his kind;

“And the owl, and the night hawk, and the cuckoo, and the hawk after his kind,

“And the little owl, and the cormorant, and the great owl,

“And the swan, and the pelican, and the gier eagle,

“And the stork, the heron after her kind, and the lapwing, and the bat.” (Lev. 11:13-19)

In this instance, the Scriptures do not tell which birds can be eaten but, rather, which birds are unclean and, therefore, cannot be eaten. Of course the inference is that fowl such as pigeons are clean and thus can be eaten because they do not fit into the various categories of those in the forbidden list. The eagle, the

vulture, and the raven are *birds of prey*, ravenous birds. They represent those Christians who have a destructive or harmful influence in their association with fellow brethren. Their avaricious, carnivorous, vulture-like disposition to tear down is displeasing in the Lord's sight. The same lesson is taught from another standpoint by the fowl of heaven that are categorized as the owl, the bat, and other *birds of the night*, birds that love darkness. Christians with this characteristic are also displeasing to the Lord, for they harbor evil deeds and thoughts and have an affinity for such more than for light. The flying fowl that creep upon all four feet portray another undesirable spiritual characteristic. Since creeping entails being close to the ground and groveling in the earth, there is a clear correspondency to swine, which wallow in the mire—obviously an unfavorable trait in the Christian life.

The following is the category of the “flying creeping thing” or insect.

“All fowls that creep, going upon all four, shall be an abomination unto you.

“Yet these may ye eat of every flying creeping thing that goeth upon all four, which have legs above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth;

“Even these of them ye may eat; the locust after his kind, and the bald locust after his kind, and the beetle after his kind, and the grasshopper after his kind.

**“But all other flying creeping things, which have four feet, shall be an abomination unto you.”
(Lev. 11:20-23)**

Certain “flying creeping things” can be eaten such as the locust, the beetle, and the grasshopper. At the time of the First Advent, John the Baptist ate locusts and wild honey, and even today in foreign countries, locusts are dipped in honey and consumed (Matt. 3:4). While these insects travel on all four feet and are flying creeping things, the distinctive characteristic that makes them clean is the possession of a pair of legs “above their feet, to leap withal upon the earth.” This characteristic represents Christians who have evil propensities but who earnestly desire to please the Lord and thus are trying to push the earth away from them. They are trying to leap up from the earth, as it were. Actually, all Christians are of fallen humanity — all are sinners and need to be forgiven by the grace of God through the merit of Jesus Christ. However, if Christians strive to lift themselves up to a higher level by God’s grace, Holy Spirit, and providences, the effort pleases the Heavenly Father.

Beasts that walk on all four paws are likewise unclean.

“And whatsoever goeth upon his paws, among all manner of beasts that go on all four, those are unclean unto you.” (Lev. 11:27)

This characteristic represents stealthiness and sneakiness among Christians—a lack of openness or open honesty. The Lord wants His people to be level, open, honest, and aboveboard. Nothing is to be done behind the back, as it were.

A further category of uncleanness is shown by “creeping things that creep upon the earth.”

“These also shall be unclean unto you among the creeping things that creep upon the earth; the weasel, and the mouse, and the tortoise after his kind,

“And the ferret, and the chameleon, and the lizard, and the snail, and the mole.

**“These are unclean to you among all that creep.”
(Lev. 11:29-31)**

All of these unclean creeping animals stick close to the ground and live either in the ground or in a shell. They hide and are secretive, and when revealed or exposed, they are unpleasant to behold. Christians who have a “weasel” disposition are characterized by smallness of thinking and petty criticism. A chameleon changes colors to camouflage or hide itself. Thus a Christian with this type of disposition is an opportunist and a

hypocrite and has a double character, not wanting to reveal his true nature.

In summation, we see that helpful lessons are derived from a study of the clean and unclean animals, fish, birds, and insects. In fact, all creatures—no matter how unpleasant to the sight—were designed by God to teach spiritual lessons, and some day in the distant future, the lessons will be properly appreciated by mankind. When the people understand the lessons, they will praise God with heart and voice. All of His creatures were created to teach a *multitude* of characteristics and lessons. Studying the laws of what is clean and what is unclean brings forth only a few of those lessons. How deep and magnificent are the ways of Almighty God!

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