

DO BIBLICAL IMPURITY RULES LITERALLY APPLY TODAY?

Female monthly periods, impurity rules, and rightly handling the Word of truth

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Some conscientious Christians have the idea that they should simply read the Bible and then do exactly what it says to do. Read and do—that's it.

So what about Leviticus 15:19-23? According to this divine instruction to the ancient Israelites, a woman during her usual healthy monthly period incurred physical ritual impurity that could be transmitted to objects and persons by contact. Verses 20-22 say, "Everything . . . on which she sits shall be unclean. . . . Whoever touches anything on which she sits shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening"¹

A few years ago I received an email message that told me of a man who literally applied this instruction in his house, acting according to what he read. He designated chairs on which his wife and daughters were to sit when they were having their monthly periods so that he and others would not become impure by sitting where they had sat.

More recently I have heard reports that some congregations in some parts of the world forbid women to speak at their church pulpits during their monthly periods, lest they contaminate holy space. Along with literal application of biblical purity rules, it is assumed that Christian churches are holy in the same sense that the ancient Israelite sanctuary was holy.

Is “read and do” enough? The apostle Paul says that God’s people should be “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). This implies that we should read, *think*, and then do, not carry out obedience as a knee-jerk unthinking response.

Some commandments do literally apply today. For example, “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:13, 14). However, not every biblical instruction must be applied literally, because our life situation is not the same as that of the ancient Israelites, to whom God originally gave the instructions. Nevertheless, we can learn from and apply the principles underlying instructions that we cannot or should not literally carry out.²

For example, according to Deuteronomy 25:5-10 the brother-in-law of a childless Israelite widow was to marry her so that she could bear a son who would carry on the name of her dead husband (compare Ruth 4) and (implicitly) take care of her when she was elderly. This teaches the principles of honoring the legacy of the dead and care for widows, whom Christians assist in ways other than brother-in-law marriage (1 Tim. 5:3-16).

LITERAL APPLICATION OF RULES ABOUT PHYSICAL RITUAL IMPURITIES?

So do the biblical rules concerning female menstrual impurity literally apply today? If so, consistency requires that other instructions regarding physical ritual impurities should also literally apply. What would happen if we simply read and did them? Following are some examples.

Leviticus 12:4 prohibits an Israelite woman undergoing purification following childbirth from entering the sanctuary, that is, the courtyard of the sanctuary. If this literally applies today, a woman who recently has given birth should not be allowed into any part of a church. When the days of an Israelite woman’s purifying were completed, she was required to come to the sanctuary and offer sacrifices officiated by an authorized Aaronic priest in order to fulfill the final stage of

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her purification (verses 6-8). This stage of purification is impossible for a modern woman to achieve because the Israelite sanctuary and temple, with its divinely authorized priesthood, are gone. Therefore, no mothers, whether Christian or Jewish, are completely pure.

Second, biblical impurity rules also applied to men. A healthy Israelite man became impure if he had an emission of semen, whether an automatic nocturnal emission or during sexual intercourse. So he was required to bathe and wait until the following evening in order to become pure (Lev. 15:16-18). Therefore, if a person with a physical ritual impurity should not speak at a church pulpit, a pastor who has an emission of semen the night before he is scheduled to preach should cancel his sermon, and someone else should preach. Of course, a pastor who accepts the myth that sexual relations are forbidden during Sabbath hours (“doing your pleasure” in Isaiah 58:13 refers to working or making others work, as in verse 3) would not do that, but a nocturnal emission cannot be prevented.

Third, Numbers 19 specifies effects of a human dead body as a source of impurity. It was necessary for people to incur corpse impurity to bury their dead. But such impurity was so strong that it contaminated not only those who touched the body of a dead person or their bone or grave; it made anyone who even came under the same roof to be impure (verses 11, 14-16, 22). Applying this today, anyone who has even attended a funeral under the same roof as the dead person (not including a memorial service at which the dead person is absent) would be impure. The only way to be purified from corpse impurity was to be sprinkled with some special water containing ashes of a red(dish)

heifer that was sacrificed in a divinely prescribed manner with the participation of an Aaronic priest (verses 1-10, 12, 17-19, 21).³

How many who have incurred corpse impurity have been sprinkled with the authorized water of purification containing ashes of a red heifer? None, of course, because that is impossible today without an Aaronic priest to officiate the ritual that would produce the ashes. Thus, all who have become impure from dead bodies permanently remain impure, so it makes no difference if they sit on chairs previously occupied by menstruating women. Furthermore, if women are prohibited from speaking in churches during their periods, nobody who has ever attended a funeral, including a pastor (who likely has attended more funerals than anyone else!), should be allowed to speak either.

By now it is clear that we cannot consistently keep the system of biblical rules regarding physical ritual impurities. These rules were designed to protect the pure sphere of holiness surrounding the presence of God at His *earthly* sanctuary residence, which is long gone. Therefore, the reason for the rules no longer exists, and we do not need to do them, although we can learn from them regarding the relationship between God and human beings (see below). It is also clear that inconsistent application of the biblical instructions concerning impurities by some unfairly picks on women and ignores impurities that men could incur.

HOLINESS OF A CHRISTIAN CHURCH?

The idea that a menstruating woman should not speak at a church pulpit assumes that a Christian church is holy in the same way that the ancient Israelite sanctuary was holy. It is true that our churches are spiritually holy in the sense that they are places to meet with the Lord (for example, Matt. 18:20). So we often refer to the main rooms of our churches as “sanctuaries.” Our churches, however, are not sanctuaries like the Israelite sanctuary, which was physically holy because the presence of God dwelt there on earth among His people (Ex. 25:8; 40:34-38; Lev. 16:2). Rather, our churches function like synagogues in the time of Jesus. Synagogues were places where ordinary people would meet to hear God’s Word read and explained to them, as Jesus did (Luke 4:16-27). But ordinary people were forbidden to enter the Israelite sanctuary or later temple. Only consecrated

Aaronic priests (of which there are none today) were allowed there (Ex. 30:20; Num. 3:38; 18:7).

Because our churches are not holy spaces like the Israelite sanctuary, there are no gradations of holiness in our churches as if the platform area is somehow equivalent to the holy place or most holy place of the Israelite sanctuary. It is true that people should be reverent in a church and the part of the church structure where the pulpit is located (often a platform) should be treated with proper respect and decorum because of its function as the place where the Word of God is read and preached to the congregation. It is not, however, holy like part of the Israelite sanctuary, and therefore physical ritual impurities cannot affect it.

PURPOSE AND LIMITS OF PHYSICAL RITUAL IMPURITY RULES

Israelite physical ritual impurities came from human corpses (Num. 19), healthy or diseased human genital flows (Lev. 12; 15), and ugly infections in human skin (not modern leprosy, called Hansen’s disease), fabric or leather, or on walls of houses (Lev. 13; 14), as well as from some kinds of animal carcasses (Lev. 11:24-40). Their “uncleaness” was not literal dirt. Nor were they sins, that is, moral faults in violation of divine commandments. Rather, they were heightened symptoms of the human state of *sinfulness*, symbolically representing the birth-to-death cycle of *mortality* that has resulted from sin (Gen. 3; Rom. 6:23).⁴ While nocturnal emissions, sexual intercourse, menstruation, and childbirth are healthy reproductive functions, impurities from these teach that every new child born into our fallen world is mortal, subject to death.

By contrast, God is the holy, sinless, pure, immortal source of all life, who is not to be associated with death or sin that has caused it. So His rules for limiting physical ritual impurities when possible or remedying them (by washing, waiting until evening, and also sacrifices in serious cases) when necessary had the purpose of teaching His people about Him and about the sin and death that separates them from Him. Christ’s sacrifice, represented by Israelite sacrifices that remedied not only sins (Lev. 1; 4:1-6:6; 19:21, 22) but also severe physical ritual impurities (Lev. 12:6-8; 14:10-32; 15:14, 15, 29, 30; Num. 19:1-10), saves us not only from our acts of sin to give us forgive-

ness, but also from our state of mortality to give us eternal life (John 3:16; compare Ps. 103:3).⁵

When Christ died, the veil inside the temple in Jerusalem was miraculously torn (Matt. 27:51). This signified that the function of the earthly ritual system at that temple, where sacrifices of animals and other materials foreshadowed His sacrifice, had come to an end (compare Dan. 9:27). Now Christ is ministering as our great high priest in God's temple in heaven (Heb. 4:14-16; 6:19-10:25), which is immune to human impurities. So the system of regulations to protect the earthly temple and its holy things from impurity is no longer relevant.

Most of us are impure according to the rules in the books of Leviticus and Numbers, *but this does not matter!* Accordingly, the New Testament says nothing about the need to observe such purity rules in our homes or ritual purity requirements for anyone to participate in any church role. In fact, holding on to such regulations that were part of the system of ritual "shadows" that pointed forward to Christ's coming (compare Col. 2:17) misrepresents God by implicitly denying that Christ has really come and has moved His place of ministry to God's heavenly temple.

CONCLUSION

We should read and then *think* before doing what we read, applying God's sacred Word to our lives and churches in light of the full revelation of Scripture as a whole, rather than by picking and choosing what we happen to notice in the Bible. Men and women do not need to concern themselves with keeping the biblical rules about physical ritual impurities today. 📌

¹ Biblical citations throughout this article are from the English Standard Version.

² On biblical laws and guidelines for knowing if or how modern Christians should apply them, see Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

³ On this unique purification offering (so-called sin offering) and its significance, including for modern Christians, see Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 659-667.

⁴ Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 60.

⁵ On the biblical system of physical ritual impurities, purification rituals, and their significance in relation to God and salvation, see Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, especially pp. 223-230.

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