

“God and Our Uncleanness”
Deuteronomy 23:9-14 & 24:8-9
September 27, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to our series in the Book of Deuteronomy, as Moses continues to instruct God’s people as to how they are to live in the land.

We’re going through Deuteronomy in its entirety, without skipping portions. And that has led to some interesting passages. And this morning is no exception.

Back when I was in seminary, one of my professors told us that in our sermons, we should be careful to avoid dwelling on the topics, of birthing, blood, bedrooms ... and bathrooms.

This week I found myself wondering if my professor had ever preached through the book of Deuteronomy.

Because, as another theologian has pointed out, while our theology often pushes us towards neat, tidy, and abstract terms and categories, the Bible instead talks about “hair, blood, sweat, entrails, menstruation and genital emissions.” [Leithart, *Against*, 51]

The Bible is often much more frank about the world than we are.

We’ve seen some of that already in Deuteronomy. We come to it again this morning.

And so, with that in mind, let’s turn to our text: Deuteronomy 23:9-14 and 24:8-9.

And as we do, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

^{23:9} “When you are encamped against your enemies, then you shall keep yourself from every evil thing.

¹⁰ “If any man among you becomes unclean because of a nocturnal emission, then he shall go outside the camp. He shall not come inside the camp, ¹¹ but when evening comes, he shall bathe himself in water, and as the sun sets, he may come inside the camp.

¹² “You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it. ¹³ And you shall have a trowel with your tools, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it and turn back and cover up your excrement. ¹⁴ Because Yahweh your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.”

And then from chapter 24:

⁸“Take care, in a case of leprous disease, to be very careful to do according to all that the Levitical priests shall direct you. As I commanded them, so you shall be careful to do. ⁹Remember what Yahweh your God did to Miriam on the way as you came out of Egypt.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, our souls long for your salvation,
and so we hope in your word.
We long for your promise,
and we look for your comfort.
As we come now to your Word, in the Scriptures,
We ask that in your steadfast love, and through your holy Word, you would give us life.
Grant this we ask, for Jesus’s sake. Amen.
[Psalm 119:81-84, 88]

Introduction

So ... our passage this morning starts with the subject of male nocturnal emissions.

From there, it goes on to talk about poop.

And after that, we jump to the topic of skin diseases.

Now ... what on earth are we supposed to do with all that?

Well, if you’re new with us, I’ll set your fears at ease: This sermon is not going to claim that you need to leave town or avoid the church building after certain bodily discharges. I’m not going to claim that if God sees your poop he might abandon you. I’m not going to ask you, when you have an oozing skin condition to show up here at the church and show it to me.

So that’s good.

But it leaves us with a new problem: If I’m not going to do any of those things ... then what is the purpose of texts like this one? How can we claim to take the Bible seriously while dismissing its literal meaning? Or, to look at it from the other end, why do we take the Bible so seriously when it contains passages like these?

Those are important questions. And they move us closer to our theme this morning.

In the Old Testament, under the Law of Moses, God gave to his people a variety of laws. Traditionally, they've been divided into moral laws, ceremonial laws, and civil laws.

And for centuries, God's people were to live in obedience to all of them.

But when Jesus came, he especially changed how the ceremonial laws applied to God's people. When it came to the ceremonial laws of clean and unclean, he brought those laws to an end. He proclaimed this himself during his earthly ministry, and then the change was reaffirmed by the Lord multiple times in the life of the early church [Acts 10:9-16, Acts 15, Romans 14:14].

In the Mosaic Law, certain things were ceremonially clean, and other things were ceremonially unclean. And a person could be ceremonially clean or ceremonially unclean. And you could switch back and forth. And your ceremonial status affected how close you could come to God. These laws of ceremonial purity that applied to Israel, no longer apply literally to Christians at this stage of redemptive history.

But that doesn't mean those laws were bad or served no purpose. Actually, the Apostle Paul tells us that in a certain stage of God's work with humanity, within history, these ceremonial laws had a very important purpose.

Paul tells us that rather than being moral in nature, or absolute in their application, the primary purpose of these laws, at the time, was to teach God's people spiritual truths, through symbolic pictures and systems.

Paul explains that the Old Testament was written down for our instruction, as Christians [1 Corinthians 10:11], and he adds that all Scripture is profitable for us, to instruct and equip us as God's people. [2 Timothy 3:16-17]

And Paul explains that one way that worked, when it came to ceremonial laws like those in our text this morning, is that such laws were meant to be a guardian, an instructor, as one translation puts it a "schoolmaster" [KJV] for God's people during the Old Testament era [Galatians 3:24]. The law was given to teach and train the people of God. [Leithart, *Delivered*, 37, 210-211]

The ceremonial laws were like lessons. Israel was called to follow them. And as they did, they were supposed to learn important lessons about God, about themselves, and about their relationship with God.

We are not required to follow these ceremonial laws today. But we're still called on to learn the same lessons as we consider those same Old Testament laws. The ceremonial laws themselves may not apply to us. But the spiritual truths they point to do still apply to us.

And so that's what we'll consider this morning.

Our text is using symbolic pictures and patterns in the physical world to teach us important truths about the spiritual world.

So ... what are those truths?

Well, what I think we see here is that: As we are, on our own, everything that comes out of us is unclean. But God has provided a way for us to be cleansed, and for him to draw close to us.

Let me say that again: As we are, on our own, everything that comes out of us is unclean. But God has provided a way for us to be cleansed, and for him to draw close to us.

Let's break that down together.

Everything That Comes Out of Us is Unclean

So, the first thing I think we are taught in these laws is that everything that comes out of us is unclean.

But what exactly do we mean by that?

In the Old Testament era, ceremonial cleanness determined how close someone could come to God. It didn't determine whether an individual was saved, or right with God for eternity, but in the symbolic system that the ceremonial law used to teach Israel spiritual truths, ceremonial uncleanness was a symbolic status that pointed to the spiritual reality that people could be separated from God.

What it meant for an Israelite to be ceremonially unclean was that, so long as they were in that unclean state, they couldn't enter the tabernacle or the temple and draw near to God there in worship, or make special sacrifices.

That was the impact on their lives. Which means, ordinarily, as they lived in the land, these ceremonial laws were not a huge burden. Most Israelites only went to the tabernacle maybe three times a year. So it wasn't that big of a deal between those visits.

When Israel was wandering in the desert, the implications for daily life may have been more significant, because the people were all living so close to the tabernacle, and God was among the camp in a special way. But once they were settled in the land, the effects on day-to-day life were much less significant. For the most part, it meant that they just couldn't come to the tabernacle or the temple. [Jordan, 200-201; see also Leithart, *Delivered from ...*, 97-98; Horne, 46]

But even so, the dynamic of ceremonial uncleanness was meant to symbolically point God's people to the kind of things that might truly separate them from God – the sort of things that might keep them from spiritually drawing close to God.

And what we learn here is that one other place those laws about ceremonial uncleanness could have an impact, was when God sent his people out on a special military action. On those occasions, God promised to be with the Israelite army that he commanded in a special way, to protect them, and to bring them victory. And so, since God was closer than normal in such military camps, some of the rules for the tabernacle applied to the soldiers. The camp became like a quasi-tabernacle and the soldiers had to follow some of the same ceremonial rules that they had to follow when they

went to the tabernacle. Because God was close in a special way. [Leithart, *Theopolis*, 4:58-5:10, 32:10-33:50]

That dynamic is what's in view in our text. And what it was meant to teach, through symbols and ceremonies, was about what the barriers are that keep us from God's presence, and what remedy is needed to restore us to God's presence.

Now, in the Old Testament ceremonial law, a person could become unclean by coming into contact with something else that was unclean. But that kind of uncleanness tended to be pretty short-lived and easy to be cleansed from.

The bigger concern, and the lesson which received more emphasis in the ceremonial law, was the lesson of how uncleanness comes from inside of us.

Because in the ceremonial law, we see a pattern that what comes from inside of us is especially what makes us unclean, and separates us from God.

It's a consistent pattern. Whether it's childbirth [Leviticus 12], or a condition where one's flesh broke out from their skin [Leviticus 13-14], whether it was an unnatural discharge of internal fluids flowing out [Leviticus 15:13-15, 25-30], or a natural discharge of certain bodily fluids [Leviticus 15:19], each of these things, whether a result of physical health or physical disease – each one made a person ceremonially unclean, often for a significant period of time. And the pattern is pretty clear: in each case, it's not primarily what goes into someone, but what comes out of them that causes significant ceremonial uncleanness – that creates a condition which can separate them from the presence of God. [Meyers, *Theopolis*, 31:1-32:10]

And Jesus later confirmed that that was the lesson he especially wanted his people to take away from the ceremonial law, saying to them: "There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." [Mark 7:15]

And that's the pattern we see emphasized in our text as well.

Whether it's the nocturnal emission in verses 10 and 11, or the excrement in verses 12 through 14, or the skin problems in chapter 24, the common pattern is that these are all things that come out of a person – from the inside out. And God here seems to be using these physical conditions, as an opportunity to teach a symbolic lesson about how what comes out of us spiritually is unclean, and a barrier to our relationship with him.

Let's look at that in more detail, and as we do, I think we see three distinctions in the patterns of our text.

First, we have a lesson here about how some things that come out of us are just unclean.

And I think we see this especially in verses 12 to 14, which, to be frank, speak about poop.

Now, I'm not saying poop itself is bad. God designed us to poop. In that sense it is a good thing – though maybe some aspects were different before the fall. And generally speaking, pooping didn't

make someone ceremonially unclean in the Old Testament. So the law about it here is somewhat unique. But it teaches an important symbolic lesson.

Generally speaking, humans find poop to be gross, putrid, and repulsive. It can even be dangerous because it carries germs that can be a threat to our health.

And so, in this ceremonial law, poop seems to be pointing the spiritual reality that some things that come out of our hearts are just bad. They're putrid, repulsive, and even dangerous.

And we all know that there are some things that come out of our hearts and minds that are like that.

We speak words and then we recoil at them. We do something, and then we're ashamed of it. We have a thought, and then we realize how offensive it is. We see a trait in ourselves that we know we find repulsive in other people. We harm people, and belittle people, we act in self-centered ways, we damage others and even ourselves, we take our Maker for granted and presume upon everything he gives us. There are a whole host of thoughts and words and behaviors that come from us that really are like excrement. And when we try to minimize them, or shrug them off, or pass them off as normal ... it really is like leaving our poop out next to our tent and then acting like it's fine, and normal, and not repulsive. We're not fooling anyone. Especially not God.

Some things we do really are like excrement: putrid, repulsive, potentially harmful. And verse 14 tells us that those sins make God want to turn away from us. Those sins repulse him too.

That's one spiritual pattern that this symbolic system points to: Some things that come out of us are just repulsive to God, and unclean.

But second, I think this passage also teaches us that even the good things that come out from us are corrupted with uncleanness.

And we see this in the ceremonial laws about the bodily functions surround childbearing.

The Bible has a very positive view of children, and childbearing. God commanded humans to be fruitful and multiply, in Genesis 1. When he called Abraham he promised to make from him a great nation, saying that Abraham's descendants would one day be as many as the stars in the heavens or the sand on the seashore [Genesis 12:2, 15:5, 22:17]. That promise was to be fulfilled through Israel. So God is emphatically for human reproduction in Israel. Having children is a good thing.

But then we also see, in the ceremonial law, that after the fall, every bodily function associated with childbearing, where something comes out of a human being – every such act makes people ceremonially unclean.

The male contribution to reproduction made both him and the woman who received it ceremonially unclean. [Leviticus 15:16-18] The woman's regular reproductive cycle made her unclean.

[Leviticus 15:19-24] When a woman gave birth to a child, she was ceremonially unclean for a much longer period, and required a special ceremony in order to be cleansed. [Leviticus 12]¹

And this should strike us as odd, because the Bible is so pro-child. And bearing children had an especially highly value place in God’s covenant with Israel.

Now, the focus of our text is on men in a war camp – and there was not supposed to be birthing or conceiving happening there. In fact, we learn elsewhere that Israelite men were kept from their wives and were called to practice sexual abstinence when gathered in the war camp. And so the focus in verses 10 and 11 is on nocturnal emissions – involuntary sexual emissions. But it points us to the larger symbolic pattern that human reproduction, which the Bible says is a good thing, still made people ceremonially unclean in the Law of Moses.

And yet ... if we think about the lessons these symbolic patterns are meant to teach ... maybe That’s not so surprising.

As our own doctrinal standards put it, our own good works – the good things we do – are always, in themselves, still defiled by sin, “and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God’s judgment.” [WCF 16.5]

And we know this about ourselves. We do something good ... but we get frustrated along the way, and act rudely and dismissively towards others as we do our “good work”. Or, even if we’re not outwardly rude as we do something good, our hearts grumble about it, even as we do it. Or, we do something good, and without complaining, but once we do it, our mind is filled with prideful thoughts, and we’re more focused on what we might get out of the good thing we did, or whether other people saw us do it, and if they appreciate how great we are.

Even the best things we do are defiled by sin: they’re mixed with so much weakness and imperfection that by themselves, they cannot stand up as truly good in God’s eyes.

That’s what verses 10 and 11 remind us of, by alluding to the ceremonial laws surrounding childbearing in Israel.

So, first we see that some things that come out of us are just unclean, and separate us from God.

Second, we are reminded that even the good things that come out from us are corrupted with uncleanness that separates us from God.

¹ It has been a point of much discussion, and distress for some people, that in Leviticus 12, the period of uncleanness a mother goes through when she has a female child is twice that of the period of uncleanness the mother goes through when she has a male child. This is often taken as implying that the Bible thinks females are more “unclean” than males. But this is a mistaken conclusion. I had the opportunity to research this question in more detail back in seminary, and the most convincing explanation I found pointed out that there was an additional cleansing ritual that was carried out for male children but not female children: circumcision. When a male child was born, there was literally a bloody cleansing ceremony in which a small part of him was cut off. This ceremony apparently “covered” a portion of the uncleanness produced by his birth, with the mother’s time period of uncleanness and cleansing ceremony covering the other half. For daughters there was no ceremony comparable to circumcision, and so the mother addressed the uncleanness herself with a longer period of uncleanness. If anything, the law is more severe for a male child, who must undergo a painful cleansing ceremony in his own body, which the female child is spared.

Third, our text teaches us that we ourselves – our very being – is unclean, and keeps us apart from God.

And we see this in verses 8 and 9 of chapter 24, where Moses reminds the people of the ceremonial laws surrounding various skin conditions, and points to the story of Miriam being struck with leprosy when she sinned.

Let's note a few things here.

First, these verses point back to a whole set of laws in the Old Testament about a whole range of skin diseases – not just Hansen's Disease, the condition that came to be called leprosy in the Middle Ages – but rather the term in the ceremonial law covered a range of skin conditions, many of them minor in a medical sense. Their significance came from the symbolic system by which God was teaching Israel spiritual realities. [Wright, 257; Brown, 232] And a feature among many of these conditions was that some aspect of flesh or fluid from the inside of the person, was coming out.

Second, with the allusion to Miriam in these verses, I think Moses is emphasizing the symbolic link between sin and ceremonial uncleanness, because Miriam's leprosy was meant to be a visible sign of her spiritual sin, in the story Moses refers to. [Brown, 232; Millar, 140]

And so again, the implication was that what comes out of us is unclean. But in this case, it's our very being – who we are, our internal selves – that is unclean and defiling.

The Bible tells us that the problem is not just that we do sinful things. But that we ourselves are sinful: our hearts are sinful, our souls are sinful. Who we are, is, in some sense, unclean. And the sinful things we say and do are really just outgrowths of the sinful nature within us.

And again ... we know this. We know the battles that take place in our own hearts. We know the strength with which our hearts want to act in selfish, twisted, or cruel ways. And the laws about leprosy give us a symbolic picture of that deeper truth: We ourselves – our very being – is unclean.

So – both we ourselves, and everything that comes out of us, is unclean.

That's the first spiritual truth we see taught here in Israel's ceremonial laws.

God Has Provided a Way for Us to be Cleansed

But the second thing we see taught here is that God has provided a way for us to be cleansed.

The symbolic system of the law here points us not just to what our problems are, but to the promise that God would provide a solution. And that solution comes in several forms.

First, God has provided a covering for our sin.

And this one is pretty simple and straightforward.

If human excrement represents human sin here, then what we have in this passage is a promise that that sin can be carried away from us, and covered, so that God can draw close to us. That's what God tells them to do with their poop. And it's also a very obvious picture of what God promises to do with our sin, in the gospel.

In Jesus, God offers to take our sin, to carry it outside the camp, and to do away with it on the cross, burying it in the tomb, covering it with his blood, so that it is forever out of God's sight. That is the promise of the gospel. If we trust in Jesus, then God will carry away and cover our sin, so that it would no longer threaten to separate us from God. That is the solution hinted at here, and fulfilled in the gospel.

Second, in the gospel, God offers to cleanse and then to receive our good works, even though they are defiled and mixed with sin. In the ceremonial law the good work of childbearing was mixed with human defilement, because of our sin. But God also provided ceremonies that would cleanse, so that both parent and child are acceptable before God. And in the gospel, God offers to do the same thing with all our good works.

One of my favorite portions of the Westminster Confession of Faith, says that even though our good works are mixed with our sin – even so, it says, just as believers are accepted by God through Christ, so also their good works are accepted by God through Christ – not because our deeds are perfect, but because God, looking on our imperfect good works through Jesus, “is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere” even though it may be “accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections” in us.

In the gospel, God doesn't just cleanse our sin. He also cleanses our good works, so that he can accept them, and cherish them, and even reward them in his grace.

So ... in the gospel, God has provided a covering for our sin, and he has provided a cleansing for our good works.

But finally, in the gospel, God has provided a way to purify our very being.

Because, despite all the ceremonial laws concerning leprosy ... none of those laws actually promised to make a leper clean. How a leper could be made clean remained a mystery, hinted at but not made clear in the Scriptures.

Until Jesus came.

Because when Jesus came, he did something extraordinary. In the ceremonial law, uncleanness spread ... but cleanness didn't. If a clean thing touched an unclean thing, they both became unclean. That's how it worked.

But then Jesus came. And he brought contagious cleanness. And he started touching unclean people. He even touched lepers. But when he did, Jesus didn't become unclean. Instead, the people he touched became clean. His purity was contagious. Hemoraging ceased. Lepers were healed. No special ceremony, could do that. But Jesus could do it.

Because in Jesus, God himself had come to earth. And his holiness and purity is stronger than our sin. It is stronger than our imperfections. It is stronger than our very being and any corruption we may have there. And so Jesus is able to make us clean – not just on the outside, but in the inside: down into the core of our very being.

At the heart of the gospel is the good news that Jesus came to make us clean: truly, and deeply, down to the depths of our hearts.

God Has Provided a Way to Draw Close to Us

And Jesus came to make us clean for a purpose. He came to make us clean so that he could draw close to us.

That's the point highlighted in verse 14. Why does all of this matter? Why has God done so much to make us clean?

It's so that he can walk in our midst. It's so that he can draw close to us. It's so that he can be with us, and we can be with him.

That's what we're made for, after all. Verse 14 of our text points us all the way back, to the very beginning of the Bible, when God walked with Adam in Eve in the Garden, close beside them and in their midst. [Genesis 3:8; Leithart, *Theopolis*, 40:00f] That's what we long for, and what the Bible promises for the future for all who trust in Christ, that one day, God will dwell with us, and we will be his people, and God himself will be with us, as our God. [Revelation 21:3]

And that's something we can experience a foretaste of even now, as Jesus promises to be with us here and now, as we trust in him. [Matthew 28:20]

Our text this morning reminds us that God is on a mission to heal that which was broken. He is at work, in the gospel, to cover our sin, to cleanse our good works, to purify our hearts, all so that he, can walk in our midst once again.

We are called to believe that now by faith – that God is with us, when we call out to him.

But we are also promised that an even greater fulfillment is yet to come.

Because one day God is going to complete his saving work. All who have trusted in him will be purified in their hearts down to the very core. And God will raise them from the dead, in renewed heaven and a renewed earth.

And on that day, we really will see him walking in our midst, dwelling with us, so that he is our God and we are his people. And we will live there like that, with him, forever.

That is the promise held out in this text.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us acknowledge our sin and uncleanness.

Let us look to Jesus, in the gospel, to cover our sin, to cleanse all our works, and to purify our hearts.

Let us trust that even now, Jesus is among us.

And let us look forward to the day when we will one day see him walking in our midst, in peace and joy, forever.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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This sermon draws on some material from my April 14, 2024 sermon “Uncleanness.”

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.