

Homiletics Analysis: Leviticus 11

Content & Intent

Broader Unit: Leviticus 11 belongs to the larger section of Leviticus (chapters 11–15) governing ritual purity and impurity, which itself sits within the broader Mosaic covenant framework establishing how a holy God may dwell among an unholy people. The book’s structural logic moves from the establishment of the sacrificial system (chapters 1–7), to the consecration of the priesthood (chapters 8–10), to the laws of cleanness and uncleanness (chapters 11–15), and finally to the Day of Atonement (chapter 16). Leviticus 11 opens the purity section by addressing the most elemental and daily interface between holiness and ordinary life: what Israel eats. The Nadab and Abihu episode immediately preceding (chapter 10) has just demonstrated in lethal terms that God’s holiness is not negotiable. Chapter 11 extends that lesson from the sanctuary into the kitchen.

This Text — Content: Leviticus 11 catalogs the distinctions God draws between clean and unclean animals across four domains: land animals (vv. 1–8), water creatures (vv. 9–12), birds (vv. 13–19), and insects or winged creatures (vv. 20–23), followed by laws governing contact with animal carcasses (vv. 24–40) and a summary prohibition on creatures that swarm on the ground (vv. 41–43). The chapter closes with a theological rationale stated explicitly: “I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy” (vv. 44–45). The dietary laws are thus not presented as hygienic advice, tribal custom, or arbitrary test — they are framed by God’s own holiness as their ground and by Israel’s called identity as their motive. The chapter ends with a formal summary statement (vv. 46–47) declaring the purpose of these distinctions: “to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean.”

This Text — Intent: God is not issuing a nutrition manual. He is forming a people whose daily lives embody the distinction between holy and common, clean and unclean — a distinction that flows from His own character. The intent of Leviticus 11 is to press the reality of God’s holiness into the most mundane corners of Israel’s existence, so that every meal becomes an act of covenant faithfulness and a daily rehearsal of what it means to be a people set apart. God is seeking to produce in His people a habituated awareness of His holiness — not as an abstract theological category but as a shaping force on ordinary life. The laws themselves train the will, order the affections, and form the identity of a people who belong to a holy God.

Subject Sentence: God’s holiness presses into daily life through the law of clean and unclean.

Primary Claim: Because the LORD is holy, His people must be holy — and the structure of their daily lives, down to what they eat, must embody that distinction; holiness is not a sanctuary category alone but the governing logic of all creaturely existence under God’s covenant.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Hygienic Reading: A widespread popular reading — common in devotional literature and apologetic contexts — holds that the dietary laws of Leviticus 11 are essentially ancient wisdom about food safety: pork carries trichinosis, shellfish spoil quickly, certain birds scavenge carrion. On this reading, the laws are divinely sanctioned public health codes that just happen to overlap with what a prescientific culture needed to survive. This reading must be qualified and, at its core, refuted. It is not wholly without observation — there may be secondary hygienic wisdom embedded in some distinctions — but it fails as the primary interpretive frame for three reasons. First, the text itself supplies its own rationale, and that rationale is explicitly theological, not hygienic: “I am holy” (vv. 44–45). The text does not say “you shall be healthy.” Second, the hygienic reading cannot account for the full catalog — why are locusts clean but other insects not? Why are the criteria (split hoof and chewing cud) not health markers at all? Third, and most decisively, it strips the passage of its covenantal function: forming a people whose daily existence is structured by the reality of God’s holiness. The hygienic reading, however well-intentioned, domesticates the passage and evacuates its theological content.

The Purely Arbitrary/Obedience-Test Reading: A second common reading holds that the dietary laws are essentially arbitrary — God could have chosen any set of distinctions — and their function is simply to test Israel’s obedience. On this view, the content of the laws is theologically inert; only the act of compliance matters. This reading is a partial truth that overreaches. It correctly identifies an obedience dimension — the laws do require Israel to order daily life around divine command. But the “purely arbitrary” framing sits uneasily with the text’s repeated emphasis on the categories of holiness and creation. Many scholars (Gordon Wenham, John Hartley, Jacob Milgrom) have identified structural logics in the clean/unclean distinctions: clean land animals occupy their proper creaturely domain (four legs, hooves); unclean creatures cross categories or inhabit ambiguous domains. Whether or not a complete categorical logic can be reconstructed, the text’s own structure suggests the distinctions are not arbitrary — they are ordered by a logic rooted in creation and the purity of God’s own nature.

The Milgrom/Structural Reading: Jacob Milgrom’s influential work argues that the clean/unclean distinctions in Leviticus encode a respect for life: blood represents life, death is the supreme impurity, and the dietary laws systematically exclude creatures associated with death, predation, or boundary-crossing from Israel’s table. This reading has genuine illuminating power and surfaces real patterns in the text that the purely arbitrary reading misses. The Reformed reader can acknowledge this as a genuine

contribution without adopting Milgrom's full anthropological framework. The structural dimension of the laws is real; the theological rationale supplied by the text itself (God's holiness, Israel's identity) is primary and must not be reduced to an anthropological category.

The New Covenant Abrogation Question: A significant interpretive issue — particularly for Reformed and dispensational readers — is whether these laws retain any ongoing normative force. The New Testament is explicit: Mark 7:19 notes parenthetically that Jesus “declared all foods clean”; Acts 10–11's vision to Peter uses the clean/unclean language deliberately to signal the collapse of the Jew/Gentile distinction; Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8–10 treat food restrictions as matters of conscience, not covenant obligation. The Reformed reading is clear: the ceremonial law of which Leviticus 11 is part has been fulfilled in Christ and abrogated for the new covenant community (Westminster Confession 19.3). The dietary laws were part of the “middle wall of partition” between Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2:14) that Christ has demolished. Their abrogation is itself a theological statement — the shadow has given way to the substance. This does not render Leviticus 11 homiletically irrelevant; it means the passage must be preached through its own theological logic (holiness, distinction, identity) rather than as a binding dietary code. The permanent principle is the holiness of God and the call to embody it; the particular dietary form of that principle was ceremonial and fulfilled.

Reformed Verdict: The text's own rationale controls interpretation: the dietary laws are grounded in God's holiness and Israel's covenant identity, not in health, hygiene, or pure arbitrariness. They encode the reality of distinction — holy/common, clean/unclean — that belongs to God's own character and that His people were called to embody in every dimension of life. For the new covenant community, the specific dietary form has been fulfilled and set aside, but the underlying theological logic — God's people are holy, their lives must be structured by that holiness, every ordinary domain of life falls under the claim of God's character — is permanently valid and demands exposition.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 19:5–6** — God's foundational declaration that Israel is to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” provides the covenant identity that Leviticus 11 fleshes out in daily life; the dietary laws are the texture of that priestly identity.
- **Leviticus 19:2** — “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” — the Holiness Code's central imperative directly echoes Leviticus 11:44–45 and confirms that the dietary laws are not an isolated regulation but part of a comprehensive vision of life shaped by God's character.
- **Acts 10:9–16; 11:1–18** — Peter's vision of clean and unclean animals and the divine command to “kill and eat” signals the ceremonial abrogation of the Levitical distinctions in Christ; the passage uses Leviticus 11's own categories to announce

the inclusion of the Gentiles, demonstrating that the old distinctions were always pointing beyond themselves to a deeper covenant reality.

- **Mark 7:14–23** — Jesus relocates the source of uncleanness from external food to the internal heart (“what comes out of a person is what defiles him”), thereby fulfilling and transcending the Levitical system; the dietary laws were pointing all along to a purity of the interior life that only the gospel can produce.
- **1 Peter 1:14–16** — Peter quotes Leviticus 11:44–45 directly (“Be holy, for I am holy”) and applies it to the new covenant community not as a dietary code but as the permanent call to holy conduct in every aspect of life — demonstrating that the theological principle survives even as the ceremonial form is fulfilled.

Aim: To show that the call to holiness embedded in Leviticus 11 — that God’s character must structure every dimension of His people’s daily life — is not a ceremonial relic but a permanent gospel claim that finds its fulfillment in Christ and its ongoing application in the life of every believer.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Introduction: the LORD speaks to Moses and Aaron; these are the laws for all creatures the people may eat	Joint address to Moses and Aaron signals both priestly and congregational scope
3	Clean land animals: those that have a split hoof and chew the cud	Two cumulative criteria required; absence of either disqualifies
4–8	Specific unclean land animals: camel (chews cud, no split hoof), hyrax (same), hare (same), pig (split hoof, does not chew cud); contact with carcasses renders one unclean	The pig receives particular emphasis — split hoof creates false appearance of cleanness; deceptive boundary-crossers
9	Clean water creatures: those with fins and scales	Again, two cumulative criteria
10–12	Unclean water creatures: all without fins and scales (swarming things, other	Strongest language in the chapter applied here; category confusion —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	living things in water); they are an “abomination”	“swarming” water creatures blur creature domains
13–19	Unclean birds: a specific list of twenty kinds (raptors, scavengers, night birds, water birds in ambiguous categories)	No positive criteria given for clean birds — only a prohibited list; reinforces the priestly need for discernment
20–23	Winged insects: those that swarm on all fours are unclean; exception for those with jointed legs for leaping (locusts, crickets, grasshoppers) — these may be eaten	Locusts were a common food source; the exception is practical and culturally grounded
24–28	Uncleanness from contact with carcasses of unclean four-footed animals; anyone who carries them is unclean until evening	Extends the laws beyond eating to touch; holiness governs contact, not merely consumption
29–38	Swarming creatures that defile: weasel, mouse, great lizard, gecko, monitor lizard, lizard, sand lizard, chameleon; contact with their carcasses defiles; contact with objects they fall upon defiles those objects	Remarkable extension: the laws govern vessels, clothing, food, water sources — total environmental holiness
39–40	Contact with carcasses of clean animals (those that may be eaten) also defiles — the one who eats or carries them is unclean until evening	Even clean animal carcasses carry impurity; death itself is the primary contaminant
41–43	All swarming creatures that swarm on the ground are an abomination; do not make yourselves detestable by eating them	“Swarming on the ground” represents the lowest created domain; creatures without clear creaturely locomotion (belly-crawling connects to Genesis 3)
44–45	Theological rationale: “I am the LORD your God;	The entire chapter’s ground and goal stated explicitly;

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”	redemption (Exodus) is the motive and holy character is the standard; this rationale is permanent
46–47	Summary statement: these are the laws concerning animals, birds, every living creature in the waters, and every creature that swarms on the ground — to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean	“Make a distinction” (הִבְדִּיל, <i>hivdil</i>) is the same verb used in Genesis 1 for God’s creative separations and in Leviticus 10:10 for the priestly function

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–8	The Land: Clean and Unclean Four-Footed Animals
2	9–12	The Waters: Clean and Unclean Aquatic Creatures
3	13–19	The Air: Unclean Birds
4	20–23	The Air (continued): Clean and Unclean Winged Insects
5	24–40	The Law of Carcass Contact: Holiness Governs Touch, Not Only Consumption
6	41–43	The Ground: Swarming Creatures Are an Abomination
7	44–47	The Theological Foundation: Holy Because He Is Holy

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God's holiness presses into daily life through the law of clean and unclean.

Primary Claim: Because the LORD is holy, His people must be holy — and the structure of their daily lives, down to what they eat, must embody that distinction; holiness is not a sanctuary category alone but the governing logic of all creaturely existence under God's covenant.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) Dismantle the sacred/secular divide by understanding that God's holiness makes no room for it. Leviticus 11 is one of the most aggressive texts in Scripture against the idea that God's claim on His people applies only in religious moments. The governing logic of the entire chapter is that what you eat for breakfast is a theological act. The contemporary believer's instinct to quarantine holiness into Sunday mornings, personal devotions, and overtly "spiritual" choices while treating the rest of life as morally neutral territory is directly addressed and dismantled here. If God legislated Israel's menu to press holiness into daily consciousness, the new covenant call to be holy "in all your conduct" (1 Peter 1:15) covers exactly the same ground — career, money, entertainment, relationships, body. There is no secular enclave in a holy life.

2. (Affections/Worship) Let the character of God — not the rewards of obedience — be the motive for holy living. The chapter's rationale appears at the end, not the beginning: "I am the LORD your God" (v. 44). The motive for the entire catalog of distinctions is not threat ("or else"), not benefit ("you will be healthier"), not tribal pride ("you will be distinct from the nations") — it is the character of God Himself. The application presses into the affections: what moves you toward holiness? If the primary motivator is fear of consequences, or desire for a better life, or social identity, the chapter corrects you. The call to holiness is a call to be shaped by who God is — to find in His holiness not a burden but a definition of what human flourishing under His covenant actually looks like. Preach this as a worship category, not a compliance category.

3. (Will/Behavior) Identify one specific domain of daily life where God's holiness is not yet governing your choices, and bring it under His claim. The Israelite could not float above the dietary laws — every meal required a decision. The application for the new covenant believer is not to reinstate the dietary code but to press the same logic into daily life with the same specificity. This is not "try to be more holy in general" — that is abstraction, not application. The application is: where, concretely, does your life operate as though God's holiness does not apply? Is it what you watch, what you say in private, how you handle money when no one is looking, how you treat people who cannot benefit you? Name it. Bring it under the claim of "I am the LORD your God."

4. (Mind/Belief) Understand the dietary laws as fulfilled, not merely abolished — and let that fulfillment deepen your grasp of what Christ has accomplished. The New Testament's handling of Leviticus 11 is not a casual cancellation. When Jesus declares all foods clean (Mark 7:19), when Peter's vision employs the clean/unclean language to announce Gentile inclusion (Acts 10), the categories of Leviticus 11 are not discarded — they are fulfilled. The wall that separated Jew from Gentile, holy from common, has been broken down in Christ (Ephesians 2:14). The believer who understands this does not simply note that the dietary laws no longer apply; they see in that very abrogation a testimony to what Christ has done. The chapter, read through the New Testament, becomes a witness to the comprehensive scope of Christ's reconciling work — making clean what was unclean, bringing near what was far off.

5. (Affections/Worship) Recover a genuine awe at the holiness of God that does not domesticate Him into a comfortable companion. The chapter closes with a double declaration: "I am the LORD your God" (v. 44, v. 45). This is not warm encouragement — it is the self-identification of a God whose holiness is so real that it governs lizard carcasses and cooking pots (vv. 29–36). The contemporary church's instinct toward relational intimacy with God — legitimate and precious — can quietly erode a genuine sense of God's otherness, His absolute distinctness from creaturely uncleanness. Leviticus 11 serves the affections by restoring weight to the attribute of holiness. To know God truly is to know One before whom all created distinctions between clean and unclean are not merely cultural but ontological — rooted in His own nature. Let the chapter recover your reverence for the One in whose presence all of creaturely existence stands under the claim of holiness.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Leviticus 11 is a primary Old Testament witness to the ontological holiness of God — His absolute separateness from all defilement — as the ground of His people's calling. The chapter teaches that holiness is not first an ethical category (be morally good) but a relational and ontological one: the character of God Himself, which defines what it means to belong to Him. The explicit rationale of verses 44–45 ("I am holy, therefore you shall be holy") establishes a logical priority that all subsequent holiness ethics must honor: the imperative flows from the indicative, the call from the character. The structural logic of the clean/unclean distinctions — rooted in creation's ordered domains and the association of death with impurity — also teaches that the created order itself is not morally neutral but is shot through with categories that reflect the character of the Creator. Finally, the chapter's reach beyond intentional consumption into accidental contact (carcass laws, vv. 24–40) presses the total scope of God's holiness claim: there is no domain of ordinary creaturely life that stands outside it.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Leviticus 11 is a foundational text for understanding the three-fold use of the law in Reformed theology. The ceremonial laws of chapter 11 — governing clean and unclean foods — belong to the category of the Mosaic administration’s “shadows and types” (Westminster Confession 19.3) that have been fulfilled in Christ and are therefore no longer binding on new covenant believers. This is not a failure of the law but its proper completion: the dietary laws were always pointing toward the deeper reality of a people consecrated by grace, separated from the world’s defilement by the work of Christ rather than by table customs. The theological principle — God’s holiness governs all of life, and His people must embody that holiness — belongs to the moral law and is permanent. The Reformed insistence that the ceremonial law be read through the hermeneutical lens of fulfillment in Christ is precisely what allows Leviticus 11 to be preached with full force: not as a dietary code to be reinstituted, nor as a dead letter to be bypassed, but as a passage whose own logic points toward and is fulfilled in the One who is Himself “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Hebrews 7:26), and through whom His people receive not ceremonial cleanness but the imputed righteousness that makes them holy before God.

Main Takeaway

God’s holiness is not a category that stays in the sanctuary — it reaches into your kitchen, your schedule, your habits, and every corner of ordinary life, and it says: *you belong to Me, and what belongs to Me is set apart*. The dietary laws of Leviticus 11 have been fulfilled in Christ, who has made clean what was unclean and torn down every wall of partition — but the claim those laws embodied has not been retired. Be holy, because He is holy. Every domain of your life is a place where that claim is either honored or ignored.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching Leviticus 11 as a health manual.** This is the most common popular misuse of the passage. The text supplies its own rationale, and it is not hygienic — it is theological. A sermon that reduces the dietary laws to ancient nutritional wisdom misses the entire point of the chapter and leaves the congregation with a fact about pork rather than an encounter with the holiness of God. Resist the apologetic impulse to justify the laws on hygienic grounds; let the text’s own rationale do the work it is designed to do.
- **Skipping the chapter entirely because it feels irrelevant.** Preachers working through Leviticus may be tempted to treat chapter 11 as a genealogy-style passage to be summarized in a sentence and moved past. This fails the congregation. The chapter is one of Scripture’s most sustained treatments of what holiness looks like

when it is embodied in daily life — and 1 Peter 1:14–16’s direct quotation of its rationale for the new covenant community shows the New Testament itself refusing to skip it.

- **Failing to preach the theological rationale (vv. 44–45) as the load-bearing center of the chapter.** The temptation is to preach the catalog (vv. 1–43) and mention the rationale as a conclusion. The structure of the chapter invites that mistake. Correct it: verses 44–45 are not an appendix — they are the key to the entire chapter. Preach the catalog *from* the rationale, not toward it as an afterthought.
- **Leaving the congregation unclear about the new covenant status of these laws.** A sermon on Leviticus 11 that does not address whether these laws still apply will produce either confusion (should I stop eating shellfish?) or a vague feeling that the passage is merely historical. The New Testament’s fulfillment of the ceremonial law must be explained — not to evacuate the passage of force but to redirect that force toward its permanent theological principle in the life of the new covenant community.
- **Moralizing the application without grounding it in the gospel.** The Clowney/Chapell warning applies here: “be holy” can easily become a bare imperative that produces guilt and effort rather than a gospel-grounded response to what God has already done. The motive for holiness in this chapter is not merely obedience — it is redemption: “I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (v. 45). The new covenant counterpart is explicit: “you were ransomed... with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18–19), *therefore* be holy. Always preach the imperative from within the indicative.
- **Missing the creation-theology embedded in the clean/unclean structure.** The word “distinction” (הַבְּדִיל, *hivdil*) in verse 47 is the same verb used in Genesis 1 for God’s creative separations (“and God separated the light from the darkness”). The dietary laws are not disconnected from creation — they are an extension of it: the God who ordered creation by making distinctions calls His people to honor those distinctions in daily life. Missing this connection severs the chapter from its deeper theological roots and makes it seem more arbitrary than it is.