

ARE YOU LISTENING TO YOUR SKIN?

Leviticus 13

Dr. George O. Wood

We're continuing in our third major section in the Book of Leviticus. The third section being laws regarding purification. We've looked at chapter 11, laws regarding food. Chapter 12, laws regarding childbirth. Chapters 13–14, laws relating to skin diseases.

Just to give you a sample of the chapter let me read 13:1–8, “The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘When anyone has a swelling or a rash or a bright spot on his skin that may become an infectious skin disease, he must be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons who is a priest. The priest is to examine the sore on his skin, and if the hair in the sore has turned white and the sore appears to be more than skin deep, it is an infectious skin disease. When the priest examines him, he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean. If the spot on his skin is white but does not appear to be more than skin deep and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest is to put the infected person in isolation for seven days. On the seventh day, the priest is to examine him, and if he sees that the sore is unchanged and has not spread in the skin, he is to keep him in isolation another seven days. On the seventh day the priest is to examine him again, and if the sore has faded and has not spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only a rash. The man must wash his clothes, and he will be clean. But if the rash does spread in his skin after he has shown himself to the priest to be pronounced clean, he must appear before the priest again. The priest is to examine him, and if the rash has spread in the skin he shall pronounce him unclean; it is an infectious disease’” (NIV).

It's a fascinating experience to attempt to interpret chapters 13 and 14 because there is considerable discussion as to what diseases are even involved. Considerable discussion among

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those who know the Scripture and who are the commentators on it. The older commentators generally treated Leviticus 13 and 14 as dealing with the disease of leprosy. The reason for this is the Greek word, which translates the Hebrew word used in Leviticus 13, is the Greek word *lepra*. Therefore when you come to the King James translation which has had the most powerful influence on the body of Christ the word *lepra* is taken and translated “leprosy.” So if you’re reading King James you’ll find “leprosy” rather than “skin disease.” Therefore these chapters became a marvelous symbol of what comparison we may make between leprosy and sin. There is indeed a great deal of correspondence between the two.

Leprosy like sin has a very imperceptible, small beginning. Yet it has such devastating after consequences. We are taught by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:28 that we should examine ourselves. We’re taught again by Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:5, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.” We know that Judas’ sin of betrayal of Christ started out with a very small thing—stealing from the apostolic purse. I don’t mean to infer that stealing is small but alongside betrayal of Christ it appears to be small. Sin in our lives frequently starts in very small manner and a very insignificant way, and it becomes worse. We’re taught to bring our spirits to God for regular checkups that we might purge the uncleanness that is in them.

Leprosy, like sin, also has progressive deterioration. Leprosy is an advancing disease just like sin is an advancing disease of the soul. Nothing is perhaps more dreaded visually than leprosy, the isolation and the tremendous suffering and pain that it brings to a person. Eventually the whole man is affected by what started out as very small and insignificant. This is again the case of sin. Sin leads us unto death.

Leprosy, like sin, also makes one insensitive. The whole problem with leprosy of course, why the limbs fall off and modern research has demonstrated this, is that the nerve endings are not

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sensitive to heat. A person can put their hand in boiling water and never feel a thing. As a result of injury to the extremities these extremities begin to lose their life and indeed begin to disappear. The result has come about from a deadening that has occurred in the nervous system. There is sin also in our lives that as we continue makes us insensitive to what the Lord is telling us. Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:2 that there are persons whose consciences are seared, who are in effect moral lepers, who go on without ever being twinged that what they're doing is clearly wrong; perhaps in an earlier and sensitive stage they could have been forewarned.

Finally leprosy, like sin, produces exclusion. The leper showed visibly the signs of death, which could not be brought into relationship with the living God. Therefore he was put outside the camp. He already belonged to the hopeless realm of the dead. Sin also ultimately excludes us from God. You can see looking at those little symbolic ways of measuring sin against leprosy why leprosy for the older commentators was a very important symbol of sin.

The newer commentators, however, say Leviticus 13 and 14 aren't talking about leprosy at all.

The word that is used is not "leprosy." There's better Greek word that actually describes leprosy, as we know it. *Lepra* was a term the Greeks used to describe all kinds of skin diseases. The real word we ought to look at is the Hebrew word. The Hebrew word stands for various skin diseases, some of which are contagious and some of which are not. The ancient Hebrew wouldn't necessarily know which ones would be contagious and which would not be contagious. So for safety's sake they were all labeled in the contagious field and isolation was practiced.

The symptoms, unfortunately, that were given in Leviticus 13–14 do not correspond to leprosy either. The Hebrew word that is used is compared in other parts of the Scripture to snow. It denotes flakiness and scaliness of the skin. The only thing we look back upon is that leprosy as it began to be frequent began to be included down the road as part of Leviticus 13–14 so that by

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the time you come to the Gospels you have persons who are lepers who are actually being segregated according to the laws of Leviticus 13–14. So while in the original instances these may not have especially been written for the leper, ultimately the leper falls under the umbrella of these laws.

We know that later Jesus will heal a leper and send him back to the priest for proof that he has been healed. Proof of cleansing. Sometimes the question arises when you have been healed whether you should go to a doctor for corroboration. We know the answer to that in how Jesus deals with these Scriptures. In those days the priest was the doctor. He's the one who gave the medical certificate of health. When Jesus healed the leper he told him "Go back and see the priest and give proof for the things Moses commanded" (see Matthew 8). Jesus told a healed leper to go get the medical certification for the cure. So we need not be hesitant in seeing a doctor as well.

These laws when you look at them, chapter 13 divides into two major parts—treatment of skin disease, verses 1–46. There are twenty-one cases of skin disease divided into six categories. The second major part is the diagnosis and treatment of "skin diseases" in clothing—mildew in clothing and similar articles. Three different cases, verses 47–58.

In human skin diseases there are six subdivisions. There's a swelling or shiny patch on the skin, verses 1–8; raw flesh, verses 9–17; there is skin disease associated with scars, where there is a scar and an outbreak of some kind, verses 18–28; there's skin disease associated with the scalp and the beard, verses 29–37; skin disease associated with white spots on the skin, verses 38–39; and skin disease associated with baldness. Verse 40 is one of my favorite verses, "When a man has lost his hair and is bald, he is clean" (NIV).

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For each of these categories, what designated something unclean was there was discoloration beneath the surface of the skin, if there was a condition of spreading. It was spreading to other parts of the skin. The result was an unclean condition. The unclean person was put outside the camp and was to take upon himself the sign of mourning. Torn clothes, loose hair and isolation. A covering of the upper lip and a crying out “Unclean! Unclean!”

This method of isolating potential contagion was probably what saved western civilization in the fourteenth century from the Black Plague, where one out of every four persons in Europe died in a rather short span of time. Finally, the church took the lead in providing a stop to the disease.

They went to these chapters and began to practice quarantine and isolation. That was the medical instrumentality of stopping the Black Plague. God provided for His ancient people without any medical facilities or drugs the means of quarantining infectious kinds of things.

Theologically what these chapters are representing is that God wants a condition of wholeness.

Picture the whole encampment of Israel, the twelve tribes and all concentrically gathered around the tabernacle, this linen-enclosed portable sanctuary with its outer courtyard and inner court of the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. The closer you went to the center of the encampment, the more you went to the perfection of God. In the center of the encampment at the tabernacle there was everything that was clean and holy. There were no deformed animals. They were not allowed in sacrifice. There were no deformed priests. There was nothing the least millimeter off. Everything was perfection to represent the holiness of God. But as you moved away from the camp and outside the camp there was deterioration, disease, death, burial, ashes. So to move outside the camp was to move away from the wholeness and integrity of God.

It's striking that when we come to Jesus, in the words of Hebrews, we have one who suffered with us “outside the camp.” And who came outside and touched the leper and ended the long

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nights of hopelessness. I think one of the reasons why these kind of Scriptures are there for us today is to make us realize how radically different the new covenant is in Christ. The law could only exclude us from God, diagnose our problem, put us outside. But Jesus comes to us where we are on the outside wanting in and touches us and brings us back to Himself.

I want to go past the discussion of the commentaries and their view of this Scripture and take off with a little different angle and deal with the inward reality of Leviticus 13 and follow the sermon title this morning, “Are You Listening to Your Skin?”

Leviticus 13–14 meant one thing in the Old Testament. It meant still another to Jesus and the apostles and the author of Hebrews. And yet still more to us in the twentieth century who are beginning to discover still more and more about the nature of the skin. The Old Testament men and women were taught to look at their skin. We also want to look at our skin today to see what message it may be giving us as to whether or not we are moving toward the center of the camp or moving outside the camp.

There’s really no body organ quite like our skin. It’s a seamless nine-pound body stocking two yards square if you were to strip it off and lay it out. The skin flexes and folds and crinkles around our joints and facial crags and gnarled toes. It’s smooth and rough. The skin is our casing, our façade. All of us have skin. God in creating us made an interesting differentiation of us from the animals. If you look at the beautiful animals it might seem God spent all His creative energy on them. And when it came to us He rested for a moment and made for us something very pale and without plumage and feathers and the like. But He made the skin for some very important purposes.

I. He made the skin first of all that we might have an information system.

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The question that we look theologically at in this chapter is, “Do we have a healthy information system?” A healthy skin helps us receive messages. Our sense of touch is needed in almost every human activity that we do. Sports, we need touch. Music, who can play any instrument without touch. For art, we need touch. And who has tried cooking without touching anything? Or tried to fix an automobile or television set. Our sexuality involves touch also. This nine-pound body sock that we walk around in has been rolled thin like pie dough by God. It’s been stacked with a half million transmitters which send us signals like telephones all jammed together, letting us know that what we are touching is hot or cold, wet or dry, how much pressure is there, what radiation is here. With one like touch of my finger I can tell whether a surface is wood or glass, whether it’s steel or plastic or fabric. What happens in leprosy is the information system gets destroyed and the nerves cannot tell pain.

The skin is therefore a model to us of the fact that God knows that we, as human beings, need to receive information. We talk about this in a spiritual sense and use our skin as a model of life.

We say God wants us also in our spiritual level to be receiving good information. When we become unclean in our information systems we don’t get the messages we need to get and therefore we begin moving away from the core and moving out to the outer realities of the camp. What keeps us from getting good information? In dealing with people and interpersonal relationships I find that the thing which most often keeps us from hearing things and being aware of what we need to be aware of is our own lack of self-worth. Especially with young people. Our failure to maybe get the grades or look as good as we think somebody else looks stops us from hearing words coming to us that God accepts us and God loves us and God created us unique and special because our information systems get jammed because we don’t think of ourselves as God thinks of us. Or maybe we don’t think of ourselves as encouraging people in our life think of us.

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Resentment and anger can be things that distort our information system so we might begin to surround ourselves with bitter companions and the presence of unforgiveness in our life keeps us from really being clean and whole in our relationships with God and with others.

Jesus wants to touch the uncleanness of our information systems and set us free so we can be free from false ideas about ourselves and from angry ideas. Are we really able to see things as they are? Or have our nerve endings been blocked and callused? Are we oversensitive to people or are we insensitive? Are we thick-skinned or are we thin-skinned? Do we boil up at any suggestion as though it were meant as a devastating criticism? Or are we so callused that we cannot hear the deepest shout at us to change. God wants us to be neither thick-skinned nor thin-skinned, but to have an information system that can truly hear what others are sharing with us and what He himself is sharing with us.

II. Another thing about the skin that we need to listen to is that the skin is very adaptive or compliant.

Every square inch of the body responds differently to touch. Scientists have mapped the nerves of the body as carefully as Rand McNally has mapped the world. One scientist has measured how much of a gram's weight it takes for a person to sense that an object has come in contact with his skin. A mosquito with good sense lands somewhere other than your sensitive hand. The skin helps us adapt to water, hot or cold. It helps us to pick things up. If we didn't have the skin and went to grab a hammer there would only be four parts of our skeleton that would be in contact with the hammer and soon they would begin to hurt. But because the hand is flexible, because it's fleshy, it can mold around the hammer and distribute the weight. Therefore if I'm looking at the information my hand is giving me by telling me its adaptive I would say that uncleanness in a modern sense would be to not be flexible. It would be to be rigid.

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Adaptiveness speaks of a person who is tough and tender. Who is strong and weak. Who saves money and spends money. But somehow they're able to adapt and at one moment be this and another be that without being inflexible and rigid. Paul knows this secret when he says, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:12).

Being adaptive means that we do not demand that God treat us only in a certain way. "God, treat me just like that person over there, or just like my expectation. If You don't, then phooey on You!" Isn't that kind of the modern view of God? Being adaptive means we move away from the uncleanness of rigidity and inflexibility and we move toward the center of the camp where God is.

III. A third reason for the skin is that it might be a transmitter.

We might ask, are we transmitting? The need for touching babies has been scientifically demonstrated. When babies are carried and mothered several times a day, the infant mortality rate drops from 35 percent to less than 10 percent. God has designed our skin as our chief organ of contact with other persons.

Jesus reached out and touched people. He didn't say, "All of you with leprosy line up here. All of you with paralysis, this group. With blindness this group. And I'll wave My magic wand and you'll all get healed at once." He took them one by one. He reached out and touched. He communicated in this manner.

How is this a lesson for listening to the skin? I'd like to apply it to the church. A theologically sound church is not necessarily a touching church. I've never wanted just a theologically sound church. That can be very cold and sterile. You can hear the grandest tones on the organ and choir and the minister may have the right perception of the Word of God but if that body of people is

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not a warm and caring people all that theology is so much rigidity and meaninglessness. God intended His people to not only be a people who were orthodox but to be a people who were loving and communicating and reaching out and transmitting. The skin is given to us by God so we can touch other people. If we are in the body of Christ that body has a skin and that skin is meant to touch.

Are we moving toward being a supportive, caring person or away from such a goal?

IV. The skin is also given by God to be a protection.

It's protective. A barrier, a water-proofer. Sixty percent of our body is made up of fluids and these would soon evaporate without the moist, sheltered world provided by the skin. Without skin, try stepping into your bathtub and see how long you'd last. Fluid would rush in like water over a flooded spillway, swelling your body with liquid and diluting the blood and water clogging the lungs and there you'd die setting in your own tub.

Skin is subject to the abuse of detergents and soaps and chemicals. It is the frontline of defense against hordes of bacteria. It can absorb blows and it is continually sacrificing itself in order to protect the body. Cells are continually sacrificed. As many as ten thousand million skin cells a day die in their protective care of your body. Just shaking hands we lose thousands of skin cells not to say what racquetball would do to us. Scientists have estimated that 90 percent of all household dust consists of dead skin. Friendly scrapings of you, your family and your guests. Of all the organs of the body skin is the most sacrificial. Skin protects us.

Spiritually we are called upon to have watchful care of one another. To really be concerned, to wrap ourselves around people. God calls us to be concerned for one another. Uncleanliness is a limit-myself attitude. If you only live for yourself then you'll wind up moving away from the camp because God designed us to care protectively for one another.

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There's a difference between the uncleanness spoken here in Leviticus 13, which isolated a person physically outside the camp, and the kind of uncleanness that happens to us spiritually, when we do not have ourselves performing the kinds of spiritual functions that God intended the physical skin to perform.

Are you listening to your skin? Are you getting the messages that God and others are sending to you? What about your information system? Are you captive? Or do you demand that God and other people treat you in only a certain kind of way and that's it or you don't respond? Are you transmitting? Who is looking to you for warmth and emotional and spiritual support and touching? And are you protecting? Are you a stumbling stone? Or a stepping stone? Have you purposed in your heart to be an example? Are you listening to your skin?

Closing Prayer

Father, we thank You today for the Scripture which reminds us that there are both medical and spiritual reasons why You have things in Your word for Your ancient people who did not have the medical care that we have. Therefore in order to stop a plague from effecting the whole camp they isolated some. We think, Lord, that there is a spiritual lesson in this for us because if all of us together fail to hear from You, fail to be adaptive, fail to reach out and transmit and touch, and fail to be protective then all of us move outside the camp as well. We move away from You, the center, where Your presence is. As we learn to listen to these biological models You have for our skin something happens to us spiritually and we realize that even as we look at our skin You have theological lessons for us. Help us, Lord, to really hear from You and really listen to other people, even our wives or our husbands, when we'd rather not listen at all. Help us to really be adaptive and flexible so that we don't terrorize others with our own rigidity or inflexibility. Help us to be warm and caring people. Maybe if we haven't had the example as children ourselves, we

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can overcome the family distances and we ourselves make changes so that we can reach out in love. Make us strongly protective, Lord, of one another. Quick not to find fault or to criticize or to tear down or to find an error. But quick instead to defend and support. To be considerate and to love. We ask this, Lord, in Your name. Amen.