

## Deut 14:1-21 Prohibit Pagan Practices

This passage contains dietary regulations. Why were certain foods restricted? We'll look into that this morning, among other things.

As Moses continues to prepare the nation of Israel to enter the PL, one of his major concerns is that Israel must maintain its distinction from the Canaanites.

.2 “You are a holy people to the Lord your God.” So the emphasis in this chapter is on holiness. What is holiness? The word means “to be set apart for God.” To be holy is to be unique and distinct, set apart from the pagans and unto God.

One of the clearest teachings in the Bible is that God's people must be distinct. It seems like some Christians have an overwhelming desire to be like everyone else. They don't want to be distinct; they want to be the same as most other people. So they live in virtually the same way that unsaved people live. Perhaps they avoid the most flagrant sins, but in large degree, they mimic the unsaved world. They want to be as closely aligned with the world as possible.

This passage reveals that we must not live like the unsaved world. Our lifestyle practices must be distinct from the pagans. If we are God's people, we must live a holy lifestyle. Our lifestyle practices must distinguish us from the pagan world in which we live.

And that pertains even to the more mundane, routine aspects of life. Moses in this passage considers two rather ordinary issues—funerals and food. Israel must pursue holiness even in the ordinary affairs of life.

Like Israel, we must be distinct from the world, even in the mundane and routine aspects of life. We must not adopt the practices of worldly people. We must avoid imitating the behaviors of unbelievers. There should be a difference between the children of God and the people of this world. We are children of God; we must live holy lives.

Notice two main things Moses says here about holiness.

I. Holiness is based on your relationship with God. .1-2

Moses begins here by telling the Israelites the reasons that they must be distinct and holy.

A. .1a You are *children* of the Lord your God. That status/condition should have an impact. It should make a difference that you are sons of God.

Exodus 4:22 ... *Thus says the LORD: "Israel is My son, My firstborn.*

Israel had a special position; they were the sons of God. They better act that way.

B. .2 You are a *consecrated* people to the Lord your God.

1. What is holiness?

The word here (קִדְּשׁוּ) means, “sacred, set apart.” Something holy is set apart for God’s use. It is dedicated to God.

2. Israel was set apart as a holy nation. They should be different from other nations.

C. You are God’s *chosen* people.

1. .2 God has chosen you to be a people for himself,

2. a special treasure – this is the second time Moses has described Israel as a “special treasure.” Cf. 7:6

“special treasure” (סֵגֻלָּה) – a valued, personal property; something of great value owned by the Lord alone. Israel is God’s special people—his chosen people, his like no others, his own people.

Exodus 19:5 *Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; ....*

3. .2end God loved Israel “above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” God chose Israel above all the other tribes and peoples for himself. Israel has a special identity. They must not squander that position by becoming like the pagans.

D. So the point here is that the Israelites must behave themselves according to who they are—God’s chosen, beloved, holy children. They have a special relationship with God, so they better act that way.

**Illus.:** Children are a reflection of their parents. If the child is a brat, we blame the parents. If the child is well-behaved, we credit the parents.

E. These regulations are based on Israel’s standing or status, their identity as God’s own special, holy people. As sons of God, they must maintain proper behavior suitable to their standing/status.

**App:** Like Israel, Christians are God's children, we are consecrated to God, and we are chosen by God. And that status is the reason we live like we do. Our lifestyle should reflect our relationship with God. Our standing/status with God prevents us from living like the pagans live. If God is our father, we cannot live like those who are not the children of God.

A very important principle: The foundation for moral behavior is God and our relationship to him. All morality ultimately comes from God. And our identity as children of God should have a major impact on how we live.

Our world today has largely rejected God as the standard for morality. They don't want to be moral in the first place, so they've rejected God.

Once you reject God as the standard/foundation for morality, what replaces God? Emotions, feelings, personal opinion, human law, majority rule. That's why our world is so chaotic; our leaders have rejected God, rejected biblical morality. They've replaced God as the foundation for moral choices with self. Cf. Rom 1—they worship and serve the creation rather than the creator. They become their own god.

As Christians, we must maintain God as the basis/foundation of our moral behavior. Why do we strive to live a godly, holy, consecrated life? Because God is our father; we are his chosen and beloved children. Our identity tells us how to act. If God is our father, we cannot live like the pagans.

**That's assuming you are a child of God (vs. 1).** But maybe you are not...

**Gal 3:26** *For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*

Israel were sons of God by birth, by ethnicity. Christians are sons of God by faith in Jesus Christ. If you have not trusted in Christ as your savior, you are not a child of God. If you are a son of God by faith, then you must live a distinctly Christian lifestyle.

**Trans.:** Israel must be distinct/different from the pagans because of this special relationship they had with God. They were God's people; they must not live like the pagans. Same is true for us.

## II. Holiness is the foundation for daily practices/lifestyle choices.

Moses deals with two areas where Israel must remain distinct: funerals and food. In both cases, Israel must be holy and not adopt pagan practices.

A. Do not mourn for the dead like pagans. .1

1. .1b These actions were done “for the dead.” I.e., these were funeral rituals. Mourners would cut themselves or shave the front of their heads as a way to express their grief over the death of a loved one.

This was a common practice among the pagans in Canaan (cf. 16:6; 41:5; 47:5; 48:37; 1 Kings 18:28), but Israel must not imitate this kind of activity.

Leviticus 19:27–28 *You shall not shave around the sides of your head, nor shall you disfigure the edges of your beard. You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the LORD.*

Leviticus 21:5 *[Priests] shall not make any bald place on their heads, nor shall they shave the edges of their beards nor make any cuttings in their flesh.*

2. Pagans did such things, but Israel must not follow their example.

**App:** Funeral practices for believers in the true and living God should be different from that of the pagans. We don’t mourn or grieve like a bunch of pagans.

**That does not mean that we don’t mourn or grieve.** Sorrow over death is perfectly acceptable for Christians. After all, Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus. It’s normal to grieve over the death of a loved one.

But we don’t harm ourselves in our grief. Even in our funeral practices, there should a distinction between us and unbelievers.

**1Th 4:13** *We do not sorrow as others who have no hope.*

Our funerals and burial rituals ought to be distinctly Christian. Even as we grieve over the loss of loved ones, we want to demonstrate our faith in God. We know our saved loved ones are with the Lord, and we know that God will eventually raise up our loved ones in the resurrection. So we grieve in hope, and that prevents us from extreme and pagan forms of grief.

The point here is that we must not imitate elements of culture that have clear associations with paganism, wicked behavior, or evil people. We are beloved, chosen, holy children of God. It’s not appropriate for us to imitate the unsaved world and adopt their practices. We must intentionally avoid mimicking the unsaved world.

That was all about *funerals*, and now Moses goes on to the issue of *food*.

B. Do not eat any detestable things. .3-21

1. Here we have a review of the dietary laws that are first given in Lev 11. The Jews had to keep kosher; they had to follow these restrictions on what they could eat.
2. Moses describes these restricted foods as “detestable” or “abominable” (תוֹעֵבָה) – repulsive, abhorred by God.
3. There are three major questions to answer as we consider the dietary laws:
  - a) *What* are the laws, i.e., what foods are restricted and allowed;
  - b) *Whom* do these laws pertain to?
  - c) *Why* are these foods restricted; what is the purpose of the dietary laws.
    - (1) The “*what*” question is easy—just look at the list of foods that were allowed and restricted.
      - (a) .4f Land animals had to chew the cud and split the hoof to be considered clean (vs. 6). Clean animals were split-hoofed ruminants.
      - (b) .9 Marine animals had to have fins and scales to be clean.
      - (c) .12 Various birds were prohibited as well as bats.
      - (d) .19 Swarming insects were forbidden.
      - (e) .21 Don’t eat anything already dead.
    - (2) *Whom* do these laws pertain to? That’s fairly simple too—the laws pertain to Israel as a nation. Moses is talking to one group of people here—Israel.

Do these dietary rules pertain to us today as Christians? No, they don't. Jesus declared all foods clean. God told Peter to kill and eat. And we are not the nation of Israel; these rules simply do not pertain to NT Christians. We are not under any dietary restrictions for religious reasons.

(3) *Why* did God set these restrictions? That's a harder question. Let's consider some options.

(a) Perhaps the difference is a matter of health, hygiene, or sanitation. Some foods are healthy; others are unhealthy. Some of these animals are scavengers or carnivorous. They have germs, parasites, or diseases. Maybe that's what makes them unclean.

But that's almost certainly not the reason. There is no biblical or scientific basis for that view.

(b) Perhaps the unclean animals are somehow associated with paganism or idolatry.

It is true that some animals were associated with idolatry, but that is not what made them unclean. E.g., bulls and goats were closely associated with paganism, but they were clean animals.

(c) Only one reason is given— .21b —“You are a holy people to the Lord your God.” That's the only reason necessary—because God said so. God is the authority; he has the right to tell us what to do.

**Illus.:** When parents tell their children, “Because I said so.”

Keeping these rules would set Israel apart as “a holy people to the Lord your God.”

Ultimately, God's choice of clean and unclean was purely sovereign. And the intent seems to be to make a distinction between Israel and other nations. God did not want his people to assimilate to the pagan culture. These dietary rules made Israel distinct.

**Quote:** [These foods] were impure simply because the Lord said so and for that reason alone were detestable and to be avoided. ... All things are pure or impure as God himself dictates and not by inherent character or quality.<sup>1</sup>

These food rules make Israel different; it sets them apart from others. They eat this way because they are God's holy people, his chosen people. They are not pagans.

Every day, as Israel prepared its food, the dietary restrictions would remind them that they are God's chosen, special, holy people. They must be different from their pagan neighbors. Even in what they eat, they must be holy, dedicated to God.

The dietary regulations are one of those categories of OT regulations that simply do not apply to NT Christians. We are not under the OT law; it does not pertain to us. We are NT Christians, not OT Israelites.

Like Israel, we certainly want to maintain a distinction between us and unbelievers, but diet is no longer a way of making that distinction. All foods are clean to us; we do not have to concern ourselves with eating kosher.

God wanted his people to be distinct and not like the pagans; that's why he introduced dietary regulations. That's the main point: do not live like the pagans; don't imitate the ungodly world.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 236.

Note on vs. 21end – prohibition on boiling a young goat in its mother's milk. The OT repeats this prohibition three times—Ex 23:19, 34:26. So it must be significant enough that Israel needed to hear it repeatedly.

Boiling a kid in its mother's milk was apparently an ancient Canaanite custom, perhaps associated with religious or cultic rituals. Israel must not adopt this practice simply to avoid mimicking the pagans. It's another example of how Israel must not paganize; they must not follow the behaviors or traditions of idolaters.

BTW, observant Jews eat kosher, and part of that practice is separating dairy products from meat products. They use separate utensils and dishes to handle milk and meat, and some have different parts of the kitchen to deal with dairy and meat separately. That tradition may be based on this prohibition.

Moses begins and ends this section with the same exhortation. Vs. 1—don't imitate the pagans; vs. 21—don't imitate the pagans.

What is the point of all of this? God's chosen, beloved, treasured, holy people must not live like pagans do. We must be distinct and different. Even in mundane matters like funerals and foods, we must not mimic the pagans.

Even in the routine aspects of life, we should show our commitment to God. Following God's commands sets us apart from unbelievers. It's a way of affirming our identity as God's chosen, special, beloved children. We must live in a way that affirms our identity and status.

Imitating the world in its dress and rituals contradicts our identity as God's children. If vs. 2 is true of you, then you must live a separated, distinctive lifestyle that reflects your identity as a child of God.

Perhaps there are areas in your life in which you are imitating the pagans. It could be a matter of style, dress, personal appearance, language, etc. Your desire is to imitate the popular people of the world. But if that style or appearance is directly related to evil people and wicked behavior, it would be wise to avoid that expression of style or that behavior. We must be distinct from our ungodly world.

We must remember our identity—vs. 2. If that's who you are, then act like it. Consecrate yourself to God. Live like a chosen, special, beloved child of God, not like you are just another pagan.