

The Unclean The Clean

“For I am the Lord who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for *I am holy*. This is the *law of the animals* and the birds and every creature that moves in the waters, and of every creature that creeps on the earth. To distinguish between the *unclean* and the *clean*, and between the animal that *may be eaten* and the animal that *may not be eaten*.”

—Leviticus 11:45–47

Anytime the subject of obedience to the Law comes up temperatures climb, voices rise, and tempers flare. The controversy always seems to be with those who oppose obeying the Law. They invariably insist that this or that law (or even the entire Law) has been abolished. Those making such assertions have the burden of proof.

We all agree that obedience to the Law cannot save anyone, but does that mean there is no use, no application, no purpose for it in the life of a Christian? Jesus emphatically stated that He was not doing away with the Law (Matthew 5:17). Rather, He *restored* it, as subsequent chapters show. Since Jesus didn't abolish, or radically alter the Law, those who stubbornly insist that it was changed must provide compelling evidence.

The very idea that a portion of the Law, or specifically the dietary laws in this context, could be summarily dismissed assumes that the nature of the directives is arbitrary. As you read through Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 you don't find whimsical, arbitrary regulations. Rather you find plain instruction from the Creator to the creation regarding simply what is fit to eat and what is not. It's a statement of the way things *are*.

There are several New Testament texts which appear to allow for the consumption of meats which the Old Testament clearly designates as “unclean.” People who wish to ignore God's instruction so that they may eat such foods have several favorite New

Testament passages which seem to support their view, at first glance.

Let's examine a few: 1 Timothy 4 is a good example of such a text. The subject Paul is addressing in this passage is *apostasy*, not “clean and unclean meats.” One heresy extant during that time was the practice of *asceticism*. The idea is that you become more spiritual by denying yourself this or that. This heresy is alive and well today. “Men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who know the truth” (1 Timothy 4:3).

Paul is warning Timothy about heresy and apostasy in the church. His letter is not addressing whether or not to obey the Law. By the way, it never occurred to the first-century church to disobey God's Law. That heresy didn't come along until centuries later.

Nothing is to be rejected (because of ascetic practices)—for it is sanctified (set apart, designated) by means of the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:4,5). Verse five is the key. What foods are sanctified by the word of God? They are listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. These are the chapters where God shows which meats are fit to eat and which are not. So you see, the very argument used to “support” the idea that you can eat anything you want actually *reaffirms* God's Law.

Another text which is often cited is Romans 14. Some have erroneously assumed that the apostle Paul is indicating that the “clean meat” laws and the week-

ly Sabbath are not to be observed when in actual fact, he's doing nothing of the sort.

The apostle Peter issued a dire warning about misinterpreting Paul's writings (2 Peter 3:15,16). So it would seem prudent to exercise caution when attempting to understand something Paul wrote. (Write for your free copy of *Paul and the Law, Understanding the Hard Sayings*).

In Romans 14, Paul is not discussing the Law of God or whether to obey it (Romans 7:12). What he is explaining is that we shouldn't offend new people who come into our midst by belittling their opinions. It is *opinions* under discussion here, nothing else.

The key is in the first verse. "Now *accept* the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions." He goes on to give the example of a vegetarian (verse 2) telling us to leave that person alone (verse 4). Clearly, Paul is stating that we should never let our own perceptions, opinions, and matters of personal preference become a cause of offense to our brother (verse 13). His statements regarding the significance of certain days should also be viewed in that context.

The biblical dietary instructions, weekly Sabbath, and annual holy days were observed by Paul and all of Jesus' disciples and are obviously not matters of opinion or personal preference, but are God's holy, perfect, incontrovertible laws!

Acts 10 is another favorite "proof text." A cursory reading of the entire chapter shows that the context is God showing Peter, through this vision, that the Gentiles were to be recipients of the Gospel as well as the Jews. Peter had a bit of a problem with racism. It surfaced again some time later and Paul addressed it publicly (Galatians 2). The point God was trying to convey to Peter with the vision is that he must not regard people of other races the same as he would unclean meats—with disdain. Peter finally understood! "God has shown me that I should not call any *man* unholly (profane) or unclean" (Acts 10:28).

Given the fact that Peter understood the vision that way, it doesn't make any sense that we should try and understand it another way. No, the arguments against obeying God's dietary laws simply don't stand up to

scrutiny.

Submitting to God's will does not earn you anything—least of all salvation. Only the sacrifice of Jesus Christ can save us. Obedience to the Law shows proper respect and reverence to our Heavenly Father. It also keeps us out of trouble (1 John 3:4). And who knows, we might even learn something. □

"All Foods Clean"?

Critics often challenge the laws of clean and unclean meats by citing the parenthetical statement in Mark 7:19: "'For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.'" (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean'.)"

Therefore in the New Testament, the critics reason, we are no longer expected to observe the "Jewish" dietary laws. However, this understanding completely ignores the emphasis of Jesus' teaching.

Jesus' statement is made during a confrontation with the Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law. First, let's understand the setting:

"[The scribes and Pharisees] saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were 'unclean,' that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

"So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, 'Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?'" (Mark 7:2-5).

Notice what the complaint is not: It is not that the disciples ate pork. It is not that they ate reptiles or vultures or bats. Instead, it is a matter of eating with "'unclean,' that is, unwashed" hands.

The Jewish *Mishnah* (a written collection of oral traditions compiled approximately 200 A.D.) prescribes a rigorous, ritualistic washing of the hands. And according to its teachings, it wasn't suitable to

wash them any old way; it was specified how to cleanse them properly. This was a tradition of men, for it is nowhere found in Scripture. One cannot be certain how many of its details can be traced to Jesus' day, but it is undeniable that a form of ritualistic hand-washing was already well established.

Jesus takes the Pharisees to task with strong statements such as these:

"They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (verse 7; cf. Isaiah 29:13).

"You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men" (verse 8).

"You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!" (verse 9).

"Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that" (verse 13).

In addition, Jesus cites an example of how some would circumvent scriptural laws which command honor toward one's parents (verses 10–12). There were those who denied their parents financial benefit—using Corban, or a "gift devoted to God," as an excuse. In other words, they used "religious" reasons—traditions of men—to get around doing what God's law plainly teaches!

"Are you so dull?" he asked. 'Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him "unclean"? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body'..." (verses 18,19).

Here Jesus is saying that if you don't wash your hands according to the tradition of the elders, it's not going to kill you. For the food merely goes into your stomach, and then exits the body in the final stage of the digestive process.

Now in most modern Bible translations, the following parenthetical clause is included in verse 19: "(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean.')"

Does that make *sense* to you? Have we been reading about the clean-unclean laws concerning meats—found in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14? Of course not! But that's exactly how many teachers would have you interpret this verse.

Let's continue and find out if Jesus made, as many commentators believe, a "change in emphasis," now directing His attention to clean and unclean meats.

"He went on: 'What comes out of a man is what makes him "unclean." For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man "unclean"'" (verses 20–23).

We find that Jesus drives home His point. Through traditions and man-made "religious" customs, the Pharisees and others like them were ignoring the basic principles of God's law! They were hypocrites! In their piety they sought to clean their hands of any impurities, but allowed their hearts to remain filthy and obnoxiously sinful! This account is included in Mark's Gospel for no other reason than to emphasize the source of *true* "uncleanness." Jesus used this occasion to turn the tables on the Pharisees and to show their hypocrisy—not to do away with any "jots or tittles" of the law (see Matthew 5:18)!

So what did Jesus mean by the questionable clause found in verse 19? It is an awkward construction that has been debated by scholars in times past, but from the context we can conclude that the New King James Version translates the verse most safely: "because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?" Rather than considering this phrase Mark's own parenthetical statement, the NJKV treats the phrase as a continuation of Jesus' "and is eliminated."

The old KJV, while perhaps a bit more earthy, also reads with the same understanding: "Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats [meaning "foods"]?" In other words, through bodily elimination, food eaten with unwashed hands will be "cleaned," "purified," or "purged" naturally.

The dietary laws of God are not the "traditions of the men," but rather are found in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. They are the "meatier" matters of the law. □

The Clean

"To distinguish between the *unclean* and the *clean*, and between the animal that *may* be eaten and the animal that *may not* be eaten."

—Leviticus 11:47

The following list was compiled by using the guidelines found in Leviticus 11.

Fish

(scales, and fins)

albacore
alewife
anchovies
black drum
bluebacks
bluebill sunfish
blue runner
bonitos
Boston bluefish
bowfin
buffalofish
butterfish
carp
chubs
cod
crappie
crevalle
flounder
frost fish

grouper
grunts
gulf pike
haddock
hake
halibut
hardtail
herring
horse mackerel
jack (pike)
kingfish
suckerfish
mackerel
menhaden
mullet
muskellunge
orange roughy
pickerel
pigfish
pike (or jack)
pilchard
pollack
perch (yellow, european)
pompano
porgy (scup)

red drum
redfin
red snapper
redfish
remora
robalo
runner
salmon
sardine
scad
sea bass
sergeantfish
shad
sheepshead
silver hake
silversides
smelt
snook
Spanish mackerel
striped bass
suckerfish
sunfish
trout
tuna
white fish
whiting

Fowl

(ground feeding, game or domestic)

chicken
dove/pigeon
turkey
duck
quail
pheasant
goose
grouse

Meat

(must chew the cud and have a divided hoof)

beef
buffalo
deer
goat
elk
sheep
antelope

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