

Did God Change The Law Of Clean And Unclean Meats?

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As far as modern religion in America is concerned, God's laws have been done away. Indeed, most who call themselves Christians seem to realize that sinning, however they define sin, is wrong, but somehow Jesus Christ kept the law for us, so everything will be all right. Why become worked up over something that no longer matters?

One area that the world has surely done away with God's law is that of clean and unclean meats. Those who believe this quote passages from the Bible that seem to say that all food, even the unclean ones, have somehow been made fit for us to eat today. A common argument is that the clean and unclean laws were part of the Old Covenant, and that is "obsolete and . . . ready to vanish away" (Hebrews 8:13).

When one states that he does not eat pork, shellfish, or any of the other foods listed as unclean in Leviticus 11:1-23 and Deuteronomy 14:3-21, he is immediately labeled as "Jewish." However, God's law is applicable to all of mankind (notice the principle of universal applicability in Psalm 94:12; Ezekiel 18:5-9; Mark 2:27; Romans 2:12-16), and it is absolutely vital for Christians to keep it to grow in righteousness (Deuteronomy 6:25; Psalm 119:172).

Before we proceed, it helps to remember who the God of the Old Testament is—the God who commanded the laws, not just for Judah, not just for all Israel, but for the benefit of all mankind. That same God, Jesus Christ, says unmistakably:

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. (Matthew 5:17-18)

Since God gives only good things (James 1:17), and the apostle Paul certifies that "the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12), we know that His law is for our benefit.

If the Bible is not the basis for one's discussion of religious matters, then one may as well not argue. This study will not convince anyone whose mind is set through the unbelieving arguments of this world, but it will build a foundation of biblical logic for us to stand on regarding this subject.

A Pre-Sinai Law

The clean and unclean laws are specifically mentioned early in God's Word, in the account of the Noachian Flood, when Noah was commanded to take "seven each of every clean animal" (Genesis 7:2). When he and his family were back on dry land, Noah "took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar" (Genesis 8:20). This suggests that these laws were known and practiced before the Flood—even from the earliest days of mankind (compare Genesis 4:4, Abel's acceptable offering). Since there were no Jews or Israelites then—not even any Hebrews—these laws are obviously for all humankind.

Genesis 9:3 contains a command that has proven difficult for some to understand: God says to Noah, "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs." Some take this to mean that God gives man *carte blanche* authority to eat any kind of animal. But is this what God said?

The key to this verse is "even as the green herbs." In other words, God gives mankind the authority to eat flesh within the same parameters as He allows us to eat vegetation. Does God allow us to eat poisonous plants like poison ivy, hemlock, deadly nightshade, etc.? Of course not! Just as certain plants are harmful to us, so are certain meats. As Herbert Armstrong explained in "Is All Animal Flesh Good Food?":

God did not give poisonous herbs as food. He gave man the healthful herbs. Man can determine which herbs are healthful, but man cannot by himself determine which flesh foods are harmful. That is why God had to determine for us in His Word which meats are clean. Since the Flood every moving *clean*, healthful, nonpoisonous type of animal life is good for food—just as God gave us the healthful, nonpoisonous herbs.

This does not give us permission to do as we please!

Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 contain God's commandment to Israel concerning clean and unclean meats. In these passages, either He lists specific animals that are clean or unclean or He provides us with instructions about how to determine if an animal is clean or unclean. For instance, He tells us specifically that the camel, the hyrax (rock badger), the hare, and the swine are unclean (Leviticus 11:4-8), but regarding fish He instructs us to determine if a species possesses both fins and scales (verse 9).

People have varying reactions to these scriptures. Some will take the position that unclean animals are harmful to the body. Many of us have had experience, either personally or by an acquaintance, with poisoning by trichinosis (a disease caused by parasitic worm larvae) in pork or becoming deadly sick from shellfish. Then others will bring up "Aunt Sarah," who ate pork and crawdads, drank a bottle of whiskey, smoked cigars every day, and lived to be 102 years old. Indeed, God makes some with amazingly strong constitutions.

God designed many of the unclean animals for the specific purpose of disposing of the earth's garbage. For instance, without feeling any ill effect, vultures can consume 59 times the amount of botulin, the neurotoxin that causes botulism, that it would take to kill a man. Pigs are scavengers that will eat anything, and if pork is not fully cooked to kill the *Trichinella spiralis* in it, it can destroy a person's health or even kill him.

Even though people throughout the world eat unclean food and live, and even though we could probably do the same—and many of us once did—for Christians, it is more than a health matter. In the Bible, God never directly connects keeping the laws of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 with health. In reality, it is a test commandment to see if we will obey God.

Peter's Vision

What scriptures does this world marshal to prove that eating unclean meat is approved by the Bible? There are several such "proof texts" in the New Testament, but we will see that they are all misunderstood passages. In fact, in the final analysis, none of them is even about clean and unclean meats!

Perhaps the best known passage is Acts 10:9-16, in which a huge sheet full of unclean animals is lowered from heaven, and a voice says, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." However, without hesitation Peter replies, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean" (verse 14). The Voice then responds, "What God has cleansed you must not call common" (verse 15).

First, what is the subject of Acts 10? It is evident from a thorough reading of the chapter that it is entirely devoted to the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion (verse 1), the first Gentile baptized into God's church. Peter's vision must be understood against this background to be understood correctly.

Second, it is apparent that Peter himself does not at first understand what his vision meant (verse 17); he certainly does not jump to the conclusion that all meats are now clean. While he is pondering it, a delegation from Cornelius arrives and requests that he travel with them to Caesarea to speak to the centurion. God tells the apostle directly to go with the men, "for I have sent them" (verse 20). Obviously, God was orchestrating the whole affair.

Third, if unclean meats had been approved, would Peter have not understood this from what he had learned from Jesus? He lived with his Savior for over three years. If anyone knew that the law of clean and unclean meats had been abolished by Christ's sacrificial death, it would have been Peter, but at this point, a decade later, he is operating under no such notion.

Fourth, his reply to the Voice, which Peter identifies as the Lord's, is quite confident, even vehement: "Not so, Lord!" In our colloquial English, this is equivalent to "No way!" This was a command that the apostle knew went against everything he knew about God's law. Even though the Voice repeats the command twice more (verse 16), Peter never changes his mind!

Fifth, within the context, Peter himself reveals what the vision meant. To those assembled in Cornelius' house, he says, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But *God has shown me* that I should not call any *man* common or unclean" (verse 28). The vision of unclean animals was merely an illustration God used to help Peter understand that salvation was open to those previously held at arm's length (see Acts 11:18). This is further evidenced by the Holy Spirit being poured out visibly on these Gentiles (Acts 10:44-47). Neither Peter nor Luke, the author of Acts, makes any further commentary regarding clean or unclean foods, as the vision had served a greater purpose.

Lastly, nowhere in the context is it ever said that God had cleansed unclean meats—this is something assumed by readers with a predisposition against this statute regulating what we should eat. As Paul says, "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:7). Acts 10:1—11:18 confirms that "what God has cleansed" is the Gentiles, not unclean foods.

"Every Creature . . . Is Good"

Another passage that *seems* to state that all flesh can now be eaten is found in I Timothy 4:1-5, especially verse 4: "For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving." The flaw with most people's understanding of this verse is that they fail to read what it and the surrounding verses really say. They lift verse 4 out of its context, not bothering to include relevant details from adjacent verses.

The chapter begins with a prophetic warning from Paul against false teachers and their teachings "in latter times." Their doctrines would be those of demons, and one of them commands their followers "to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving . . ." (verse 3). Many stop right there, but the rest of the verse is vital to understanding: ". . . by those who believe and know the truth." These pesky details change the tenor of what the apostle is saying.

Notice that the subject is foods or meats in general, not necessarily unclean meats. This must be read into the passage. If we consider only the word "foods," it is just as likely that Paul means that these false teachers would preach against eating beef as against eating pork or shellfish. However, the rest of the verse modifies the term. What "foods" did God create to be received—eaten—with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth? The list appears in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14! God has never given mankind any other list of creatures that are divinely certified as "food."

Verses 4-5 must be taken together, as they are one thought. Paul is telling Timothy not to worry about such prohibitions because God created every creature as "good" (Genesis 1:21, 24-25, 31), and a Christian should accept what he is offered to eat with thanksgiving. Does this mean that we should not refuse skunk, badger, bear, tiger, snakes, slugs, snails, vultures, rats, horses, eel, and oysters, as long as we give thanks for it? Of course not! Again, this is not the end of the story.

I Timothy 4:5 adds important, modifying elements to what this means: ". . . for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer." *Sanctify* means "to set apart for a specific use or purpose." The apostle is saying, then, that certain "creatures" are sanctified or set apart as human food—by what means?—by God's Word, the Bible! God reveals these "sanctified" meats to us in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.

Paul adds prayer to the setting apart of these foods because we have Christ's example of asking God to bless the food before eating (see, for instance, Luke 9:16; 24:30). This further sets apart the food we are about to eat as approved and even enhanced by God, but in no way does it make unclean meat clean. Besides, Scripture gives us no authority to make such a request of God.

In summary, Paul is reiterating that 1) God has set certain foods apart for His people to eat; and 2) we should not be fooled by false teachers who claim either that anything and everything is good to eat or that certain biblically approved foods should not be eaten.

"Purifying All Foods?"

Mark 7:14-23 (and its parallel account in Matthew 15:1-20) is another set of scriptures that some believe state that nothing entering into a man can defile him, therefore eating whatever one wishes is perfectly all right. Can this be correct?

Yet again, those who believe this fail to understand the subject of the chapter, which is Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees for their rejection of God's commandments in favor of their own

traditions (verse 8). Verse 2 introduces the context: "Now when [the Pharisees] saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault." The dispute was over ceremonial cleanliness—eating without first washing one's hands—which is not even an Old Testament law but a "tradition of the elders" (verse 5), which the Pharisees had themselves proclaimed authoritative.

In addition, beyond this fact, note that the kind of food the apostles were eating is "bread," not meat. Jesus' later comments speak generally of "foods" and "whatever enters the mouth," not specifically meat. Mark 7 is not about clean and unclean meats at all!

Verse 19 contains the phrase "thus purifying all foods," and many have jumped to the conclusion that Jesus declared all foods clean (as many marginal references state). The context, again—the very sentence in which it appears—proves this false: "Do you [disciples] not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, thus purifying all foods?"

First, "thus" is not in the Greek text but has been supplied by the translators. Without it, the sentence plainly states that the stomach "purifies" any kind of food put in it, not that Jesus had somehow declared all foods to be purified. Second, *purified* is the Greek word *katharízoon*, which means "to cleanse," "to purify," "to free from filth." In relation to the stomach's or the digestive tract's ability to "purify" food, the sense of *katharízoon* in this verse is "to purge of waste." This is brought out clearly in the parallel statement in Matthew 15:17: "Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated?"

Do these scriptures do away with the law concerning clean and unclean meats? Not at all!

Common Meat

The final passage, Romans 14, may be the most difficult one because of the way it is translated in the King James Version and in most other translations. As in the other difficult scriptures, the subject is not clean and unclean foods but eating meat versus vegetarianism (verse 2). Paul admonishes Christians not to pass judgment on others for eating meat or for eating only vegetables (verse 3).

The question that confronted Paul was not that God's people were suggesting that somehow unclean animals had now been made clean, but the belief of some that no meat—even meat that had been created to be eaten with thanksgiving—should be eaten at all. The apostle points out that it would be wrong for the vegetarians to eat meat if they had doubts about it, as it would defile their consciences (verse 23). He concludes, "For whatever is not of faith is sin."

Verse 14 is a proof text used by the world to conclude that all meat is now fine to eat: "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." This is another verse that has been poorly translated to conform to preconceived notions.

The problem is with the word "unclean," which does not appear in the Greek text. To mean "unclean," Paul would have used *akarthatos*, but instead, the text reads *koinos*, which means "common," "ordinary," "defiled," or "profane (as opposed to holy or consecrated)." Peter uses both "common" and "unclean" to describe meats in Acts 10:14, so there is obviously a difference between the terms.

We know that the Bible defines "unclean" meat in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, but when is meat considered "common"? The only circumstance in which clean meats are common or defiled is when a clean animal dies naturally or is torn by beasts (Leviticus 22:8) or when the blood has not been properly drained from the meat (Leviticus 17:13-14; 3:17). Such animal flesh was called common because it could be given to strangers or aliens in Old Testament times if they wished to eat it (Deuteronomy 14:21). Similarly, in Acts 15:20, 29, the apostles forbade the Gentiles to eat the meat of a strangled animal or meat that had not been drained of blood.

In the case of Romans 14:14, it is likely that "defiled" would be the best term, as the meat under discussion was probably that offered to idols then sold in the marketplace for public consumption. To paraphrase, then, the verse should read: ". . . there is nothing defiled of itself; but to him who considers anything to be defiled, to him it is defiled." The meat was not defiled in fact, just in the minds of various church members, whom Paul had earlier called "weak" (verse 2). These "weak in the faith" Christians believed that, because the meat had been offered to a pagan idol, it had become spiritually defiled.

Paul explains in I Corinthians 8:4-7 that the demon behind the idol is nothing, for "there is no other God but one" (verse 4). Thus, there is no "spiritual" taint to the meat.

However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. (verses 7-8)

So we see that in these verses that Paul is not in any manner doing away with God's laws concerning clean and unclean meat. The topic does not even come up! He is discussing meat defiled or profaned due to its association with a pagan idol.

In fact, all the scriptures we have reviewed confirm that the law concerning clean and unclean meats is still in effect today.

Two foundational verses are good to remember when questions over the doing away with God's law arise.

» Malachi 3:6: "For I am the Lord, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob."

» Hebrews 13:8: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

God has good reasons for the laws He gives, and James reminds us, ". . . with [God] is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17). Rather than assume that an Old Testament law is done away, we should trust that our Maker knows what is good for His creatures and put it into practice in our lives, unless it has been specifically set aside in the New Testament. At least its principle is still valid, which will help us to live abundantly.