

Clean vs. Unclean Foods – Part 2

Does the distinction still apply today?



Issues Dealt With in This Study

Part 1

- Is the distinction between clean and unclean meats of divine or human origin?
 - At what time did it originate?
 - Why was it given?
 - What was its motivation and purpose?
 - Was it only for Jews, or should Christians also observe it?
 - Did either Jesus or his apostles abolish it for the Christian Church?
- What about the prohibition against eating blood? Is that still applicable?

Part 2

- Difficult passages explored:
 - 'Jesus declared all foods clean' (Mark 7)
 - 'What God has cleansed you must not call common' (Acts 10)
 - 'I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself' (Rom. 14)
 - 'But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do' (1 Cor. 8)
 - 'Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake' (1 Cor. 10)
 - 'For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving' (1 Tim. 4)

This study will give you a clearer picture concerning God's dietary laws and how it applies today. Take time to look up the Bible passages referred to – you will be surely blessed by the time spent in exploring Scripture.

Mark 7

- “¹The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and ² saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were



‘unclean,’ that is, ceremonially unwashed. ³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders)... ⁵ 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?’ ⁶ He replied, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites’ ⁸ ‘You have let go of the commands of God and are holding to the traditions of men.’ ... ¹⁴ Again Jesus called the crowd to Him

and said: ‘Nothing outside a man can make him unclean by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean’...¹⁸ ‘Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean? 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.’)”

- It is of importance to note that the washing of hands referred to here was strictly ritualistic, not sanitary. A small quantity of water was poured on the fingers and palm of each hand, followed by a particular ritual.
- Before we can unravel this passage, we need to understand another concept first, viz., defilement by association.

Defilement by Association

- During the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament (about 400 years) a non-biblical idea arose of **defilement by association**, i.e. if something clean (like an apple for instance) touched something unclean (e.g., hands that were ceremonially unwashed), the apple would become **common** or defiled. It was ‘common’ to the world (i.e. Gentiles could eat it), but forbidden to pious Jews.
- So there were 2 types of unclean foods at the time of Christ:
 - Unclean foods by **nature** (Leviticus 11). This is what GOD prohibited
 - Unclean foods by **association**. This was what MAN prohibited
- Jesus rejected this false understanding of uncleanness, calling it a tradition of man. The Traditions of Men always compete with the Commandments of God (Mark 7:8)
- Notice Jesus’ response in vs 18 and 19 - “Don’t you see that nothing (*i.e. no clean food*) that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’ (*since true uncleanness comes from within a person*)? For it (*i.e. what the person eats*) doesn’t go into his heart (*the place where morality comes from*) but into his stomach (*a mere digestive organ*), and then out of his body.” (*Jesus was more concerned about morality than rituals*) [In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”] - i.e. Jesus declared all foods HE originally approved for man as clean even if they had been touched by ceremonially unclean hands
- Note the word Jesus uses in vs. 19: “In saying this, Jesus declared all **FOODS** ‘clean.’” The word for ‘foods’ here in Greek refers to ALL kinds of food, flesh or non-flesh in nature. Mark did not say: “... Jesus declared all *unclean meats* clean, but he declared all **FOODS** clean.” The issue in Mark 7 is not about unclean meats, but about food in general. As mentioned, the Jews believed that ALL food (apples, grapes, nuts, beef, etc.) touched with ceremonially unclean hands became *common* or defiled.

- The problem between Jesus and the Pharisees in this story had nothing to do with the **kind** of food to be eaten (whether clean or unclean) but the **way** in which it was to be eaten— with or without ritual hand washing (vs. 2, 3)

Acts 10

- Context of Peter's vision
 - There was a kind, God-fearing man by the name of Cornelius, who prayed daily but did not have a knowledge of the Messiah (10:2, 36-43)
 - He was a Roman centurion (10:1) and therefore looked upon by the rabbis as a heathen and therefore unclean.
 - While in prayer one day, an angel appeared to him and directed him to send for Simon who was in Joppa (10:3-7)
 - Shortly thereafter, Peter got the following vision of common and clean animals on a sheet (10:9-23):



A Roman Centurion

Peter's Vision: Acts 10:9-23

- ⁹ The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. ¹⁰ Then he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. ¹³ And a voice came to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' ¹⁴ But Peter said, 'Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything **common** or **unclean**.' ¹⁵ And a voice spoke to him again the second time, 'What God has cleansed you must not call **common**.' ¹⁶ This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again."
- Is the Bible, as many believe, here teaching that we can eat unclean meats? If so we would immediately have a few problems:
 - If in Mark 7, as some claim, Jesus declared all foods clean, why is Peter, 5 years later, still saying that he had NEVER eaten anything common or unclean?
 - Unclean animals were *permanently* unclean – they were such by nature. So if God said that Christians could now eat unclean animals, did he suddenly change the physiology, eating and sanitary habits of these animals?

How Did Peter Understand This Vision?

- Peter does not seem to have understood this statement in a literal way, for immediately after the vision it is stated that "Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision which he had seen might mean" (vs. 17).
- It was at this moment that messengers from the Gentile Roman centurion, Cornelius arrived at Peter's door.
- By the time that he had arrived at the home of Cornelius, Peter had apparently discovered the meaning of the vision, for he later said, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me (*i.e. in the vision*) that I should not call any **man** common or unclean" (Acts 10:28).
- It is also interesting to note that the vision does not say that the sheet was just full of **unclean** animals. In fact there were 2 types of animals on the sheet:
 1. Common (Gr: *koinos*) animals: Clean animals that had been contaminated or defiled by contact with unclean animals
 2. Unclean (Gr: *akathartos*) animals: Animals unclean by nature, like pigs, donkeys, etc.

- In the vision, the Voice never mentions "unclean" animals but reprimands Peter for calling creatures "common" which God had made clean
- So Peter was reprimanded for regarding clean creatures as defiled, just because of their association with unclean creatures

Purpose of Peter's Vision

- God was trying to teach Peter (and the early church) a critical lesson. Using the language of the vision He basically said: Clean foods (as Jews considered themselves) do not become common or defiled by associating with unclean food (i.e. Gentiles, as Jews viewed them).
- The point of the vision was that Jews could mingle with Gentiles and would not become defiled
- This vision helped Peter (and the first Jewish Christians) to overcome their prejudice towards Gentiles and to stop seeing the latter as sinners and unclean people
- It was God's call for the Jews to reach out and mix with Gentiles in order to bring salvation to them.
- This vision therefore has NOTHING to do with allowing man to start eating unclean foods.

Romans 14

- ¹Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on *disputable* matters. ²One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him... ¹⁴I am fully convinced that *no food is unclean in itself*. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean."
- Some people interpret this as follows: "Paul says that no food is unclean in itself, but is unclean to the person who regards it as such." So, if I for instance eat pork and don't consider it unclean, then for ME it is CLEAN. But if you don't eat pork because you consider it unclean, then for YOU it is UNCLEAR.
- This reasoning does not make sense. Pork is either clean or unclean; it cannot be clean for some and unclean for others
- Is the cleanness or uncleanness of an animal only in the MIND of the eater? Let's explore this concept further.

So What is Paul Really Saying?

- A number of Bible commentators believe that it is reasonable to assume that Paul in Romans 14 is dealing with the same problem as in 1 Cor. 8 and 10, viz., foods offered to idols:
- Let's look at the issues in 1 Cor. 8 and 10 first and then come back to Rom. 14 and tie the two together

1 Corinthians 8

- In 1 Cor. 8:7-11 Paul says:
 - ⁷Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁸But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. ⁹Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? ¹¹So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge."

Furthermore in 1 Corinthians 10:25-28 Paul Says:

- “²⁵ Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience’ sake; ²⁶ for “the earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness.” ²⁷ If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience’ sake. ²⁸ But if anyone says to you, “This was offered to idols,” do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience’ sake; for “the earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness.”



A Meat Market

Implied Issues in 1 Corinthians 8 & 10

- A careful study of this section reveals 3 issues that Paul was addressing:
 1. Could a Christian join friends/relatives at a pagan temple and eating foods sacrificed to idols?
 2. Could a Christian buy clean meat in the marketplace that has been *associated* with idolatry (i.e. buy clean meat offered to idols and then later sold in the market)? Wouldn’t it be defiled meat?
 3. Could a Christian accept an invitation to a pagan’s home if such meat was offered there?

Paul’s Response to These Issues

1. Do not accept invitations from friends or relatives to eat food in pagan temples (since it would imply worship to such gods):
 - 1 Cor. 10:14-22 - “Flee from idolatry... The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons... You cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the **table of demons**...”
 - 1 Cor. 8:10 – “For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating **in an idol’s temple**, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?”
2. But you can buy clean meat that has been offered to idols / associated with idolatry (since an idol is nothing – 1 Cor. 8:4)
 - 1 Cor. 10:25 - “Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience’ sake”
 - Paul is really saying: ‘Eat whatever clean meat is sold in the market even if it has been offered to idols.’
3. You can accept invitations from pagan friends or relatives who offer you such foods:
 - 1 Cor. 10:27 - “If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience’ sake.”
 - What Paul is saying is: ‘Eat whatever **clean** meat he/she puts before you without asking them if it had been offered to an idol first. The meat is clean anyway. Clean meat does not become unclean by association.’

One Exception

- If eating clean food sacrificed to idols (when either buying it in the market or eating it at a pagan friend’s / relative’s home) violated the weak conscience of someone, then you should not eat it for the sake of your weaker brother, even though there is nothing really wrong with such food.
- A principle for Paul: Your personal freedom and rights must always be subservient to the interests of others.

Let's now consider the concept of absolutes before bringing this discussion in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 to a conclusion.

A Word on Absolutes

- Absolutes are when you use: 'all, everything, only, always, nothing, never, whatever, etc.'
- Example: A son asks his dad for a R500. Dad tells his son that he only has R150 in his wallet. After some discussion dad then tells his son: 'You can have **all** my money.' What did the dad mean? All his money in the bank on fixed deposit, all his policies, all his assets? No, in the context he is merely saying: You can have all the money **in my wallet** – *understood from the context*.
- So when Paul says: 'Eat **whatever** is sold in the meat market' it is understood the meat is clean, since this is the only food the Bible regards as fit for man. He doesn't have to repeat it all the time.
- Another absolute: Jesus said - "If I be lifted up [i.e. on the cross] I will draw **ALL** men to me" (John 12:32). Yes the cross does have a magnetic, drawing power, but will ALL men be drawn to Christ? Will all be saved? No. It is understood from the context that: "If I be lifted up, I will draw all men [who respond to Me]"
- Be careful of absolutes! Check out the context.



Back to Romans 14

- “² One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him...”
- Who is strong person here, who eats all things?
 - It is the person of knowledge, strong in the knowledge that an idol has no real existence. Therefore, whether the food has been offered to an idol or not makes no difference to him or her.
- Who is the weak man who eats only vegetables?
 - This is the recent convert from paganism, who has not entirely overcome their fear of their former gods, and therefore, to eat clean meat offered to idols would defile their conscience. To that person the food is **common** and defiled.

Let's Look at Romans 14:14 Again

- “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.”
- The word for unclean here is actually 'common' – i.e. *unclean by association*, and not by nature.
- Taking the context into account, Paul is trying to say the following: “I know and am convinced as one enlightened by the Lord that nothing which God created as food for mankind can become unclean by association, but if someone considers clean meat that was offered to idols as common (i.e. defiled by association with idolatry), then for that person it is unclean by association, not by nature. By eating such meat, this recent convert from paganism to Christianity would feel that he/she is going against their convictions. Be tolerant, they are still growing in their understanding and faith.”
- Notice that the uncleanness does not lie in the nature of the food but in the believer's view of it.
- Paul, therefore, appeals for mutual love and patience to the weaker brother

- So if properly understood, the distinction between clean and unclean still remains. Unclean foods are still unfit as food.

Let's Look at 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 Again

- So with this understanding, let's read the passages in 1 Cor. 8 and 10 again with clearer insight:
 - 1 Cor. 8: ⁷Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁸But food [*i.e. clean food, whether sacrificed to an idol or not*] does not bring us near to God [*i.e. God's favour is not obtained by using or avoiding food that has been offered to idols. God looks at the heart and takes note of the thoughts and motives*] we are no worse if we do not eat, [*i.e. by refusing to eat foods sacrificed to idols, the believer does not increase his excellence or moral worth*] and no better if we do. ⁹Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? ¹¹So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge."
 - 1 Cor. 10: ²⁵Eat whatever [*clean meat*] is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake; [*without asking if it had been sacrificed to idols or not*] ²⁶for "the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness." ²⁷If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever [*clean food*] is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake [*i.e. don't ask them if the meat they are giving to you has been sacrificed to an idol*]. ²⁸But if anyone [*i.e. most likely a weak brother*] says to you, "This was offered to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake [*i.e. the conscience of the weak brother*]; for "the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness."

1 Timothy 4:1-5

- "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ²Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. ³They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. ⁴For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."
- Interpretation held by many: Everything God created (such as pigs, crocodiles, snakes, lobsters, etc.) is good and should not be rejected. They are cleansed by the word of God and prayer (i.e. the prayer you say just before eating them)

What Does the Text Really Say?

- The false teaching spoken about here is one that forbade marriage (something good which God instituted at Creation) and required abstinence from foods that God created for mankind to receive their necessary nutrition from.
- The Bible identifies the foods that God gave at creation for mankind's nourishment.
 - At creation: fruits, grains, nuts (Gen. 1:29, 30)
 - After entrance of sin: vegetables (Gen. 3:18)
 - After the Flood: clean flesh foods (Gen. 9:3)
- With that in mind, let's read the passage again: ¹The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.

² Such teachings come through hypocritical liars... ³ They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from *certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving ...*

⁴ For everything God created [**as food for man**] is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving...”

- The foods that God created for man were only clean. Thus this text cannot be used to support eating unclean foods.

Acts 15:28-29

- “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.”
- This was the conclusion of the first General Church Council in Jerusalem.
- The issue at stake in Acts 15 was how many regulations which were specifically Jewish in nature should be imposed upon Gentile converts.
- Some say: ‘See the council did not mention clean and unclean foods and therefore that Old Testament distinction does not apply for the Christian in the New Testament period.’
- Since most of the first Gentile converts had previously been attending the synagogue even before they heard the gospel, they would in all likelihood have known about the Jewish dietary restrictions. Most likely they were already avoiding unclean meats.
- The fact that the matter of unclean meats was not mentioned may merely indicate that that particular issue was already understood and did not need to be spelled out further.
- Furthermore, the council did not cover all moral issues. For example, the fact that the council did not advise the converts not to steal or kill did not, obviously, mean that it was now acceptable for Christians in the New Testament to steal and kill.
- **NOTE:** When Paul spoke about ‘things offered to idols’ it was with reference to pagan temples (see ‘Paul’s Response to These Issues’ on p.5). Christians were to steer clear of these temples, thus showing that they had turned from idolatry to the worship of the one, true God.

Conclusion

- God has given us enough wise counsel in the area of Clean and Unclean Foods.
- We have seen that the distinction came about at the time of the Flood when flesh was introduced to man’s diet.
- We saw that unclean animals contain more toxins and diseases
- All clean animals are herbivores – getting their nutrition directly from plants
- Unclean animals are *perpetually* unclean and can never be made clean through any ritual
- God called the eating of unclean foods an abomination, the same word he uses for homosexuality, idolatry, child sacrifices, etc.
- The warning not to eat unclean foods is a universal law for all mankind, not only the Jews
- God never changed this law at anytime throughout the Bible, even in New Testament times

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