

FR 331

“Handle Not, Nor Touch, Nor Taste!”

"Hey, Grandpa, what's for supper?" "Fried catfish, shrimp gumbo, black-eyed peas seasoned with ham hock---." "No, Grandpa, you know God said we can't eat those unclean foods like catfish, shrimp, and pork."

Are all foods kosher (lawful) today? Yes, you agree? Well, maybe with the exception of blood? And alcoholic drinks? And drugs?

If all foods are lawful today, why did God in times past categorize foods as clean and unclean? Was it for health reasons? Or, were they just arbitrary choices which God decided to bind as tests for his people?

Two or three decades ago a popular book proposed that God had Israel's health in mind in making his selection of kosher foods. Other regulations like circumcision, unclean times for women, and touching dead animals included on the list were supposed to be based on health. Just a few weeks ago I caught a bit of a radio interview with a fellow who has written on the subject. He was explaining how that catfish and shrimp are scavengers that purify water; hence, should not be eaten.

We have given God lots of reasons which he did not announce! We explain that pork is high in cholesterol, some animals have worms, and circumcision is more hygienic and helps prevent uterine cancer. In a current Christian publication, in pushing her weight loss program, a good sister declares that over-eating is a sign of a spiritual need and she proposes a spiritual answer to the problem. Spirituality measured by the pound – or lack thereof! The slim are more spiritual? And all along I thought it had to do with a person's eating habits and metabolism.

It is true that gluttony is not acceptable, but is it determined by weight? Before Hollywood popularized the gaunt figure, in more austere cultures being plump was looked upon as an indication of health and affluence, hence, it was a mark of beauty, and artists portrayed it as pleasing. Was that a cultural sign of a spiritual need?

Without being too tedious with the whole list of things regulated, especially in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, we would do well to ask about other prohibitions on the list. Would it be unhealthful to boil a kid in its mother's milk (Dt. 14:21)? How could plowing with an ox and a donkey together, the planting of two kinds of seed in a vineyard, or the wearing of a coat mingled of wool and linen affect health, morality, or spirituality (Dt. 22:9-11)? Lacerating one's forehead (Dt. 14:1) might invite infection, but so would circumcision. Priests, other persons, clothing, and houses could become ritually unclean, but they could also become clean again.

While it is true that we can see some health benefits from some of the regulations, God did not give them for that purpose. If he had been giving laws of sanitation, why did he not tell them of bacteria and sterilization? If pork was forbidden because of its high cholesterol, why were not eggs, butter, and animal fat in general on the forbidden list? Was God more concerned with their health than with ours? He did not see fit to bind any or all those regulations on us.

It seems to be characteristic of pagan religions, cults, and cultic Christian religions to put some undue emphasis to certain foods, sexual activity, marriage, and mysticism. We are not just speaking of such radical cult leaders as David Koresh and Marshall Applewhite, but even to the Catholic and Mormon religions. People will turn to the Bible to support whatever current cause they are promoting, whether it be belief in an imminent destruction of the earth, animal rights, women's liberation, environmental issues, slavery or abolition, diet and weight control, exercise programs, prohibition or use of liquor, political activism or pacifism, use of medicine or faith healing, mental health treatment, or Biblical guidance to wealth.

In a sense we might say that it is good that people place so much trust in the Bible to answer their every need; however, the Bible is not a do-it-yourself textbook for all practical aspects of life. As examples, the incidental facts that Jesus walked on his journeys, went apart to pray, and ate broiled fish give no precedents for us to follow any more than the number of the highway we may be traveling happens to indicate our age or the speed limit. Such use of Scripture as proof-texts erodes the credibility of the Bible. The Book guides us into a relationship with God and then gives moral and spiritual guidance for those in him. So don't plan your menu based on proof-texts. Jesus has told us that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles the person (Matt. 15:11).

As to the purpose for all those distinctions laid out for Israel, let us listen as God gives his own reasons. *"You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and do them; that the land where I am bringing you to dwell may not vomit you out. And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation which I am casting out before you; for they did all these things, and therefore I abhorred them. But I have said to you, 'You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.' I am the Lord your God, who have separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean beast and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; you shall not make yourselves abominable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine"* (Lev. 20:22-26; compare Deut. 12:29-31).

God forbade their practice or use of anything that held religious significance to the pagans who were being driven from their land. Although we do not know specifically what meaning the pagans attached to each forbidden practice, we can accept God's explanation for his restrictions.

Those food restrictions were parts of the Law delivered through Moses solely for Israel. Christians were never bound by that code of law or any other code of law which demanded "handle not, nor touch, nor taste" (Col. 2:20f), yet the principles behind those former prohibitions are always to be respected. Israel was under a covenant of law, but disciples are under a new covenant of grace unlike the first covenant (Heb. 8:8-13). Theirs was written on stone and parchment but God has written his principle of action on our hearts.

In Peter's vision (Acts 10, 11) God clearly indicated that the formerly unclean animals in the vision were no longer to be classified as unclean. God had removed the distinctions between both foods and people – Jews and Gentiles. So the Law that imposed those restrictions must necessarily no longer be effective. But Peter, along with other apostles and elders, signed a letter to Gentile disciples in Antioch which stated: *"For it has*

seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell" (Acts 15).

Peter was not disregarding the lesson learned from his vision, nor were they retaining some of the laws given through Moses. These four forbidden practices were common in worship of idols. They were not the only things Gentiles living among idolatrous people must observe to be disciples, but these were special warnings lest they compromise with the idolatry of their culture. Likewise, a disciple today with the principle written on his heart will not participate in idolatrous practices, whatever form they may take.

When I was living among the Cajuns of southern Louisiana, I truly enjoyed their good food. But I would never taste of their *boudin* for they used some blood in its preparation. Now I understand that, since it was not eaten respecting any idol but simply as a food, I would not have been violating any restriction of God for us. However, even if it had been an offering to idols, I could still have eaten it privately if I understood that it was just food and that there is only one God. That is, I could have eaten it unless it caused a weak, misunderstanding disciple who was escaping from idolatry to be emboldened to return to idolatrous concepts. And it would be wrong for me to eat if I thought it was wrong! But in all that, it would not be the food that was unlawful. Any fault would lie in my heart.

Food, wine, and drugs are neither clean or unclean, nor right or wrong as defined by law. They have no moral quality. However, undisciplined use of, or addiction to, food, alcohol, or drugs is sinful. "*All things are lawful for me, ' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me, ' but I will not be enslaved by anything"* (1 Cor. 6:12; compare 10:23-33).

Paul deals with this in Roman 14, a portion of which states, "*I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean. If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let what is good to you be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit..." "Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. Only take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak,"* is an added comment by Paul (1 Cor. 8:8f). Reading those entire chapters is helpful. No certain food is on a forbidden list, but the circumstance of eating it may cause us to violate our brother. Since we do not live among pagans who use foods as offerings to idols, these instructions only apply to us in principle. Paul would have us to apply them to our current scruples (Rom. 14).

There is yet a puzzling question about the consumption of blood. Before and apart from the Law given to Israel, God told Noah, "*Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood"* (Gen. 9:3f). God assigned a different reason for abstaining from blood. I have no appetite for blood, and I doubt if you do, so I am not trying to find loopholes! It seems that, since new covenant writers had much to say about food, and the only prohibition applying to eating blood (Acts 15) indicates its connection

with idolatry, it must be concluded that no universal prohibition applies to us today. The Jehovah's Witnesses miss the point entirely in making this apply to blood transfusions.

Paul wrote to the Colossians (2:16-23), "*Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. ...If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to human precepts and doctrines ... ?*"

Paul gave Timothy a finalizing statement for our conclusion: "*Now the Spirit says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, through the pretensions of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer*" (1 Tim. 4:1-5).

All foods are consecrated by the word of God, for he told Peter no longer to call what he had cleaned unclean. We consecrate it to God by thanking him for it rather than dedicating it in devotion to idols. This is not a demand for formal prayer before each meal, snack, or beverage but a recognition of the one God who provides our food and all good things. []

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