

## Chapter 18

### Mildew, meats, and cleanness

**A**mong the rules God gave the ancient Israelites were various laws about cleanness and uncleanness. The primary purpose of these laws was not hygiene, but ceremonial status. People who were “unclean” were not allowed to participate in religious ceremonies.

Are these laws relevant today? This chapter examines the evidence in the five books of Moses and the New Testament. Some of the details may seem tedious, but they will help us better understand the Old Testament concept of uncleanness.

#### Religious purity

The word for “clean” (*tahor*) may also be translated “pure,” as we see in numerous places in Exodus. The tabernacle furniture and utensils had to be made with *pure* gold. Jacob told his household to get rid of their idols and to “purify” themselves and change their clothes (Genesis 35:2). We are not told how they purified themselves, but it seems to have been related to worship. Later, Levites were purified with “the water of cleansing” (Numbers 8:6, 15, 21).

Portions of a sin offering had to be incinerated in a clean place (Leviticus 4:12). Ashes of the burnt offering had to be put in a clean place (Leviticus 6:11). The priests ate sacrifices in a clean place (Leviticus 10:14). If priests performed an offering when they were unclean, they were to be expelled (Leviticus 22:3). They could eat offerings only when they were clean (verses 4-7; Numbers 18:11-13).

If something unclean touched meat of the fellowship offering, that meat would have to be incinerated (Leviticus 7:19). Only clean people could eat meat of the fellowship offering (verses 19-21). If an unclean person ate the meat, that person was to be expelled (verses 20-21). However, unclean people could eat nonsacrificial meat (Deuteronomy 12:15, 21-22; 15:21-22).

In these passages, the distinction between cleanness and uncleanness was made for religious purposes, relating to the Levitical and sacrificial system of ancient Israel.

#### Sexual impurities

The Hebrew word for “unclean” (*tame*) may also be translated “defiled,” and this is how the NIV translates it in Genesis 34:5, 13, 27. When Shechem had sex with Dinah, she became defiled. A person who committed sexual sins was defiled (Leviticus 18:20-23). Adultery was called impurity or defilement (Numbers 5:12-30). A woman who remarried was defiled for her first husband (Deuteronomy 24:4). Witchcraft and child sacrifice would also defile a person (Leviticus 18:21; 19:31; 20:2-3).

Sin was involved in the cases above, but in the vast majority of cases uncleanness did not come from sin. For example, normal sexual intercourse rendered both husband and wife unclean (Leviticus 15:18). Childbirth made women unclean. For a boy baby, the mother was unclean for a week, and cleansed or purified 33 days later. For a girl baby, the mother was unclean for two weeks, and purified 66 days later. In both cases, her purification ceremony involved a burnt offering and a sin offering (Leviticus 12:1-8; Luke 2:22).

Menstruation caused uncleanness for seven days, and whoever touched the woman’s bed was unclean until evening (Leviticus 15:19-23). If a man slept with her during menstruation, he would also be unclean for seven days, and any bed he slept on would also be unclean (Leviticus 15:24). An emission of semen caused uncleanness, whether it was during intercourse or a nocturnal emission (Leviticus 15:16-18; Deuteronomy 23:10).

Unusual discharges, sexual or otherwise, caused a man or woman to be unclean (Leviticus 15:2-3, 25-27). If an unclean man touched anyone or spit on anyone, that person would be unclean until evening (Leviticus 15:7-8). If the unclean man touched a pot, the pot had to be broken (Leviticus 15:12). When the discharge stopped, the person could be cleansed after a week, with a sin offering and a burnt offering (15:13-15, 28-30).

#### Unclean things

A basic principle of uncleanness was contagiousness: “Anything that an unclean person

touches becomes unclean, and anyone who touches it becomes unclean till evening” (Numbers 19:22). If a person went into an unclean house, he would be unclean (Leviticus 14:46). If a person touched an unclean bed, he would be unclean until evening (Leviticus 15:4-10). Even if a person accidentally touched anything that would make him unclean, he was “guilty.” He had to confess his “sin” and make a sin offering (Leviticus 5:3-6).

If an unclean animal died and touched something, the thing would become unclean; it was to be put into water and would be unclean until evening (Leviticus 11:32). But if a dead animal touched a clay pot, the pot and its contents would have to be destroyed (verses 33-35). If a dead animal touched dry seeds, they would be clean, but if they were wet, they would be made unclean (verses 37-38).

If a person touched a dead body, he would be unclean for seven days and unable to be in religious activities such as the Passover (Numbers 5:2; 9:6-10; 19:11, 16). If a person died in a tent, all who were in the tent would be unclean for a week (Numbers 19:14).

Priests were allowed to become unclean as a result of the death of close relatives, but not of in-laws (Leviticus 21:1-4). But the high priest could not become unclean for any relative (21:10-12); nor could Nazirites (Numbers 6:7). If a person died in the presence of a Nazirite, the Nazirite had to offer a sin offering and a burnt offering because he “sinned” by accidentally being near a dead body (verses 9-12).

People who were unclean because of a dead person could be cleansed by the water of cleansing, which was made with the ashes of a specially sacrificed red heifer (Numbers 19:9-13, 17-19). Although the ashes could be used to purify people from sin (verse 9), people who made the ashes were unclean, and those who touched the water were unclean until evening (verses 7-10, 21). Those who failed to be cleansed in this way were to be expelled (verses 13, 20).

On the day of Atonement, the high priest atoned for the uncleanness of the Israelites (Leviticus 16:16, 19, 30).

### **Skin diseases**

Various skin diseases could cause a person to be considered unclean. If a sore was more than skin deep and the hair turned white, the person was unclean (Leviticus 13:3, 20, 25, etc.). If the skin problem spread, the priest pronounced the person unclean (verses 8, 22, 27). Such persons had to live outside the camp and warn people that they were unclean (verses 45-46).

When the people could be declared clean, the

priest killed a bird, dipped another bird in the blood, sprinkled the person and released the live bird (Leviticus 14:2-7). The person then had to shave and wash twice before he was fully clean (verses 8-9), then offer a guilt offering and a sin offering, and the priest was to anoint him on the right earlobe, the right thumb and the right big toe (verses 10-32). Surprisingly, if the problem covered the entire body, the person was clean (Leviticus 13:12-13). And if the sores turned white, the person was clean (verses 16-17).

Mildew was a similar problem. Clothing with spreading mildew was unclean and had to be burned (Leviticus 13:47-55); even if washing helped, the affected material had to be destroyed. If a building had a spreading mildew, it had to be scraped and repaired; if the mildew returned, the entire house had to be dumped outside the town in an “unclean” place (Leviticus 14:33-45). If the mildew did not return, the house was declared clean after a ceremony in which one bird was killed and the other released (Leviticus 14:48-53).

### **Purpose of the ceremonies**

The laws of uncleanness are unusual, and the purification ceremonies are unusual, too. Why would a red heifer be more effective than a black one? Was there any public-health reason for dumping sacrificial ashes in a clean place rather than an unclean one?

Does the law forbid husbands and wives to sleep in the same bed 25 percent of the time? Why was sexual intercourse defiling? Why were *sin* offerings required for circumstances beyond a person’s control? Why were pots broken rather than purified in fire? Were people supposed to avoid uncleanness if they could? Was it sinful to help bury a dead relative? Why did the water of cleansing make some people clean and others unclean? Why are the rules so concerned about contagious skin diseases, but not any other contagious diseases? Why is a person affected from head to toe considered clean? Why anoint the right big toe instead of the left little toe?

There are many questions we cannot answer. The distinction between clean and unclean was, as far as we can understand, sometimes arbitrary. Above all, the rules reminded the Israelites that they were different from other peoples. Births and deaths reminded the people to get right with God. Daily activities reminded the people that they were not perfectly holy. Various taboos gave the people frequent reminders that God had something to say about how they lived. Sacred things were different from ordinary things, and the Israelite nation, being holy to God, was different from other nations.

Laws about uncleanness might have given the

Israelites some public-health benefits, but those benefits seem more incidental than the main goal. The quarantining of skin diseases may have helped prevent their spread, but it would have been better to quarantine other diseases. It would have been good to wash before childbirth as well as afterward. If mildew was a public-health hazard, it would have been dangerous for anyone to scrape the inside of the house walls.

God did not claim any health benefits for these rules. Therefore, although we might discern, from our 20th-century perspective, some health benefits to some practices, we have no authorization to claim that they were all principles of health. These laws do not authorize us, as Christians, to examine skin sores and expel people from church services if their sores have gotten larger. (But, as an expression of love for others, we rightly quarantine for contagious diseases that the Law of Moses does not mention.) We do not forbid people to take the Lord's Supper if they touched a dead person the previous day. We do not check to see who has slept on which bed or how long it's been since they had a discharge of some sort. If we kill a mosquito on our arm, we do not wash our clothes and consider ourselves unclean until evening even though we have been touched by a dead unclean animal.

Moreover, we have no scriptural guidelines telling us which customs were arbitrary and which were beneficial. Therefore, we have no biblical reason to reject one rule and retain another. All the procedures for washing are now obsolete (Hebrews 9:10), superseded by the spiritual cleansing that Christ gives. In the new covenant, we do not have any rules for cleansing; they are not relevant to our relationship with God. (Of course, we believe in good hygiene and sanitation, but this is not under discussion in the biblical concepts of clean and unclean.)

Jesus' example is instructive. He touched people with leprosy and people with discharges (Matthew 8:3; 9:20). Even though the people were healed, under the old covenant rules, both they and Jesus would technically be unclean until evening. However, Jesus made no effort to avoid this. Nor do we read that Jesus ever participated in a cleansing ceremony. In the new covenant, a nocturnal emission or menstruation does not affect our status with God. It is not wrong to touch a dead person. There is nothing to repent of, to ask forgiveness for or to be cleansed of in the religious sense.

### **Unclean meat — before Moses**

Now let us look at the distinction between clean and unclean animals. It's the same Hebrew word; there

is no indication in the Bible that this uncleanness was different in nature or in purpose to other types of uncleanness.

Noah was told to make a distinction between clean and unclean animals (Genesis 7:1-9). We are not told why Noah was to make the distinction; the only evidence we have in Genesis is that the clean animals were used for sacrifice (Genesis 8:20). After the flood, God said, "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything" (Genesis 9:3). This suggests that humans did not eat any meat before the flood. Therefore, when Noah took clean animals into the ark, he did not bring them for eating, but for sacrifice.

The distinction between clean and unclean animals was for sacrifices, not for food. Moreover, Genesis 9:3 says nothing about clean and unclean in reference to eating meat. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* says: "It seems that in the mind of this writer the distinction between clean and unclean animals was intended for sacrifices only: for in the following chapter he makes God say: 'Everything that moveth shall be food for you' (Genesis ix. 3)."<sup>1</sup>

After the flood, Noah was allowed to eat "all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air...every creature...all the fish...everything that lives and moves...everything" (Genesis 9:2-4). Blood was listed as an exception, but unclean animals were not. The implication is, and the traditional Jewish interpretation is, that Noah could eat any kind of meat he wanted, just as he could eat any kind of green plant he wanted. (Some plants are poisonous, of course, but God did not describe which are. He allowed humans to discern which plants are good. Likewise, some animals are not good for food. God allowed Noah and his descendants to discern which were good for food.)

### **Food laws in the old covenant**

Clean and unclean animals are listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. But we might notice that God makes no claims regarding health. He does not say that camels have more parasites than cows do, or that fish-eating herons are more hazardous than fish-eating ducks. He simply gives rules without giving reasons. We are not told why honeybees are unclean but honey can be eaten. We are not told why bottom-feeding carp may be eaten but bottom-feeding catfish cannot, or why grasshoppers are permitted but crabs are not. Or we might wonder whether camel's milk and human milk

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<sup>1</sup> *Jewish Encyclopedia*, "Clean and Unclean Animals," volume 4, page 110.

are equally forbidden.

If anyone touched a dead unclean animal, he would be unclean until evening (Leviticus 11:24-26). However, the same penalty applied to Israelites who touched a dead clean animal or ate any of it (Leviticus 11:39-40; 17:15). Leviticus 5:2-6 prescribes the additional penalty of a sin offering and a guilt offering even for accidental touching.

### **Purpose of the rules**

Why did God give these rules? Leviticus 11:44-45 gives this reason: Since God is holy (separate), he wanted his people to be holy and distinct from other cultures. He wanted them to make distinctions in what they could do and what they should not. It was a reminder of holiness.

Leviticus 20:24-26 gives a similar reason: God set the Israelites apart from the nations, so they must therefore make a distinction between animals. "I am the Lord your God, who has set you apart from the nations. You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals.... You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own."

The rules in Deuteronomy 14 begin (verse 2) and end (verse 21) with a similar setting apart. If the Israelites found something dead, they were not allowed to eat it, but a Gentile could eat it. "Do not eat anything you find already dead. You may give it to an alien living in any of your towns, and he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner. But you are a people holy to the Lord your God."

The meat was unclean, but it could be given or sold to a Gentile. But God would not encourage something harmful to be sold. This verse shows that the distinction between clean and unclean was designed for Israelites, not for health. Israelites had different rules than Gentiles; the rules about uncleanness separated the Israelite nation from Gentile nations.

Years later, Ezekiel criticized the priests for their failure to teach the people the difference between the clean and the unclean. They were failing to do their duty under the old covenant — failing to discern leprosy from nonleprosy and failing to discriminate against those who had touched corpses and people with discharges. A similar criticism was given by Malachi: The people and priests were giving defective offerings. When the prophets criticized Levitical functions, they were not telling us what we are required to do today.

Ezekiel predicted a time when the priests would do their duty, teaching the difference between clean and unclean (Ezekiel 44:23). But in his prophecies of correct

worship, he also included sacrifices (Ezekiel 20:40; 45:17) and a requirement for circumcision (Ezekiel 44:9). When the prophets made predictions about worship, they were not telling us what we are required to do today.

### **Health benefits?**

The Bible never indicates that the uncleanness of meat was different from any other sorts of uncleanness. It served similar purposes. The Bible doesn't make any claims about health benefits in these chapters. Although we can see some health benefits to avoiding certain types of meat, these benefits appear to be incidental rather than the primary purpose of the list. If the problem was parasites, for example, the simple solution would have been to require thorough cooking. Moreover, clean animals can have parasites, just as unclean animals can.

If health were the primary purpose, then God didn't include enough laws. If God wanted to give us health laws, he would need to spend more time advocating exercise and sleep rather than forbidding seagulls and bats, which few people want to eat anyway. He would need to tell us about which mushrooms are dangerous, and which herbs increase our chances for cancer. He would need to tell us about the more dangerous health hazards.

Using human reason and scientific data, we might be able to discern some health benefits to avoiding certain types of unclean meat, but we cannot with biblical authority say that they are *all* harmful to health. The rules presumably did not harm the Israelites' health, but neither did God claim that this set of laws would benefit their health. He promised to help their health if they obeyed the entire covenant (Deuteronomy 7:15), but this was described as a supernatural blessing, not simply a natural result of a better diet. The laws were given in terms of holiness, not health. Holiness and health may overlap, but they are not synonymous.

### **Rules not for Gentiles**

God told the Israelites to make a distinction between the clean and the unclean because he had made a distinction between the Israelites and the Gentiles. Under the new covenant, however, God does not make a distinction between Israelites and Gentiles. He dwells in us all. We all have access to God equally — God hears our prayers whether we have touched a dead body or not, whether we have eaten pork or not. He calls on us to be holy, but in matters of the heart rather than external rules that have no connection with morality. Just as circumcision is now a matter of the heart, so also

is the distinction between the clean and the unclean (Hebrews 10:22; James 4:8).

Jews have traditionally considered their dietary rules to be unnecessary for Gentiles. Gentiles need to observe these restrictions only if they want to become proselytes and come under the covenant made at Sinai. Gentiles could be saved, the rabbis taught, by observing laws that go back to Noah, and avoiding unclean meat was not part of their requirements. In this way, the Jews acknowledged that Genesis does not forbid the eating of unclean meat, and that it is a ceremonial matter, not a moral one. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* defines Noachian laws:

laws which were supposed by the Rabbis to have been binding upon mankind at large even before the revelation at Sinai, and which are still binding upon non-Jews.... They declared that the following six commandments were enjoined upon Adam:

(1) not to worship idols; (2) not to blaspheme the name of God; (3) to establish courts of justice; (4) not to kill; (5) not to commit adultery; and (6) not to rob.... A seventh commandment was added after the Flood — not to eat flesh that had been cut from a living animal.... He who observed the seven Noachian laws was regarded as a domiciled alien...as one of the pious of the Gentiles, and was assured of a portion in the world to come.<sup>2</sup>

Christians today have a relationship with God based on the covenant of faith and promise made with Abraham (Galatians 3:6-9). Faith leads us to worship and obey our Lord and Savior, but ceremonial laws are no longer required. Laws that were added at Sinai do not set aside or add to the Abrahamic covenant (verses 15-17). Circumcision is an example: It was added after the promise was given to Abraham, and is not necessary for Christians today. Circumcision may or may not have health benefits, but they are incidental and not a basis for religious requirement.

Although the distinction between clean and unclean animals existed before Abraham for sacrificial purposes, the meat of unclean animals was not a prohibited *food* until after the old covenant had been made. Under the old covenant, unclean meats were a matter of ethnic separation and worship regulation, and the rules are therefore not a matter of sin today — just as it is not a sin to touch a dead body or to have a skin disease or sleep in the same bed at certain times of the month.

## Clean and unclean in the New Testament

In Mark 7:15-19, Jesus said, “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.” Jesus was addressing the Pharisees’ practice of handwashing before every meal (verse 3). This washing was not because of their concern for personal hygiene, but because they did not want their eating to make them ceremonially unclean. Jesus worded his analysis of their practice with a general statement that applies to foods as well as hands and utensils.

In the Old Testament, uncleanness was a matter of external matters. Even touching an unclean thing, let alone eating it, could defile a person. Therefore, Jesus’ statement that nothing entering a person defiled him or made him unclean went against a basic principle of that whole system. A person was defiled by what came out of his heart, not by what physically touched his body. God looks on the heart, not the stomach; he judges our attitudes, not our diets.

## Peter’s vision in Acts 10

Peter was given a vision of many animals and told to kill and eat (verse 13). He protested, saying that he had never eaten anything common or unclean, but the command was given again and again.

The vision was then explained: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (verse 15). Peter also explained the vision: “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean” (verse 28). Therefore, even if Cornelius had been eating pork, he was neither common nor unclean. Those distinctions were no longer valid. His food could not make him unclean.

In the vision, the common and unclean animals represented Gentiles. In vision, the animals were called cleansed. Peter understood from this that Gentiles were cleansed. But would Peter understand this conclusion if unclean animals were not in fact declared clean? If the animal remained unclean, wouldn’t the person it represented also remain unclean? God was showing Peter that Christians were no longer separate from Gentiles — his people included Gentiles. The laws of separation no longer applied. The purpose of the laws of unclean meats no longer applied. The meats that were commonly eaten among the Gentiles did not make them religiously unacceptable.

This passage does not directly say that God cleansed all foods, but many readers have seen that implication. There is certainly nothing in Acts 10 to counteract that implication — nor is there any

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<sup>2</sup> “Laws, Noachian,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, pp. 648-49). Talmudic references are *Aboda Zara* 64b and *Sanhedrin* 56ab; see also *Sibylline Oracles* 4:24-34.



discussion of unclean meat in Acts 15, when the Jerusalem council decided that Gentile converts did not have to keep the Law of Moses. Since the Jewish rabbis did not think that Gentiles were required to avoid pork unless they became circumcised, and the council was inspired to conclude that circumcision was not required, the implication in this historical context is that the council did not require Gentiles to quit eating unclean meats.

### **Learning over time**

In the vision, why did Peter refuse to eat the unclean animals? Because he did not yet understand that they could be considered clean. He did not understand the implications of Jesus' comment. He did not yet understand that common meat could be eaten, or that he could fellowship with Gentiles. In his own experience as a Jew and as a Jewish Christian, he had "never eaten anything impure or unclean" (Acts 10:14).

Peter's understanding was incomplete, and he learned a bit at a time. Moreover, he did not perfectly live up to what he understood, as Paul points out in Galatians 2. Peter withdrew from Gentile tables when legalistic Jewish Christians came to Antioch, and Paul rightly criticized Peter's double standard. Those legalistic believers would have known from Jesus' teachings that handwashing and other nonbiblical rules were wrong. Yet they were still making separations between Jews and Gentiles.

Paul notes that Peter normally ate with Gentiles, not considering them unclean (Galatians 2:12). Peter lived "like a Gentile and not like a Jew." It is permissible for a Christian to live like a Gentile. Peter concluded that the church should not "force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs" (verse 14).

### **"All foods are clean"**

We turn next to Romans 14, which tells us that all foods are clean, and it discusses the delicate matter of handling people in the same congregation who disagree as to what foods are permissible. One of the issues in Romans 14 is vegetarianism, but Paul's explanation of the subject applies to meats, too, especially when he says, "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean" (verse 14). He says something similar in verse 20: "All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble."

The Roman church included both Jews and Gentiles, and some of the Jewish Christians may have been vegetarians because they distrusted the ritual

cleanness of all meats. Whether that is the case or not, Paul's statements are principles that may be applied to all matters of clean and unclean foods. When Paul said that no food is unclean, he used the Greek word *koinos*, which means common or ordinary, unclean or defiled. He clearly said that all foods are clean, using *katharos*, the same word Jews used for cleanness and clean animals.

Paul was not careful to restrict his statements or their application, even for a church area he had not been in before, even though it contained both Jews and Gentiles. Paul's Gentile readers in Rome would have understood that pork was a food, and from Paul's letter, they would have concluded that it was clean or OK to eat.

### **Don't judge others**

But Paul knew that some people would not accept his analysis. He did not demand that they agree — he told them to do what they thought they should, and he cautioned others to avoid offending them.

Paul wrote to the strong in faith: "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (verse 1). Is the matter of unclean meat a disputable matter? In a congregation containing Jews and Gentiles, yes. Some people's belief may allow them to eat all meats, but other people may believe that they ought to abstain from pork and shrimp. "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" (verse 3). It is not wrong to abstain, but it is wrong to condemn someone else.

"Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls.... We will all stand before God's judgment seat," Paul advised in verses 4 and 10. "He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God" (verse 6). Whether we eat or whether we abstain, we should do it in an attitude of submission to Christ.

If a person thinks that eating pork is a sin, then he or she should avoid pork. "The man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin" (verse 23). Each person must be fully convinced about the way to serve the Lord (verse 5). It's not that all ways are equally acceptable, but that each person should be fully convinced. The attitude is more important than the action itself. It's the inside of a person that counts most.

### **Don't offend others**

Paul also cautions that the strong should not flaunt their liberty. "It is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble" (verse 20). "If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil" (verses 15-16). "Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way" (verse 13).

Some Christians believe it is wrong to eat pork. Their experience would be similar to Peter's. They have not eaten pork or shrimp. It would be wrong for anyone to pressure such people into eating pork. "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall" (verse 21).

"Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food," Paul says to everyone (verse 20). Do not let disputable matters lead to dissension and judging within the church. "Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God" (verse 22). That does not mean that you have to keep your beliefs secret, of course (Paul did not) — it means that your belief affects your own relationship with God; it should not intrude into other peoples' relationships with God.

When Paul wrote that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and we should honor God with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), he was talking about sexual sins, not about health. The holiness that God wants is in our morality, not in our diets. We are sanctified in our hearts, not in dietary customs. If we are discerning good from evil in our morality, then we are automatically obedient to the purpose of the clean/unclean rules about discharges and sores and meats.

### **Consecrated by the word of God**

The last relevant scripture is 1 Timothy 4:3-5, which says that all food may be eaten if it is "consecrated by the word of God." Does the Bible consecrate all meats? Romans 14:20 says yes — all are clean. Everything that God has created is good (1 Timothy 4:4). This passage does not comment on whether all meats are good for our health, just as it does not say that all vegetables are good for food. Whether it is good for food is up to people to judge, just as it was in the days after Noah's flood. The distinctions given in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 do not tell us.

The New Testament says that all meats are "clean" — the category of uncleanness was a religious, ceremonial category that ended with the old covenant. God's people were commanded to avoid unclean

animals only within the old covenant. The law began when the old covenant began and ended when the old covenant was made obsolete by the death of Christ. The New Testament specifically says that all foods are, for religious purposes, clean.

Are any meats unhealthful? Yes, but that category is not exactly the same group of animals forbidden under the old covenant. Whether a meat is good for food is determined not by a ceremonial category, but by scientific research. The church does not make such decisions, and should not forbid its members to eat any particular kind of meat.

Some people may avoid pork just in case it might be harmful to health. That is certainly permissible, but we cannot make that a religious requirement for those who do not have such beliefs. The Bible does not say that those rules had anything to do with health, so we cannot preach that they do. Some meats are harmful to health, but the church is not in the business of enforcing dietary rules, whether they concern meat or vegetables or minerals.

The distinction between clean and unclean animals was for sacrificial and ceremonial purposes and, later, to distinguish Israelites from Gentiles. The rules affected participation in the sacrificial system — and that context is now obsolete. The rules are not requirements today. The New Testament tells us that food cannot make us spiritually or physically unclean. All food is clean. It is not a sin to eat pork or shrimp or beef. The kingdom of God is not based on food or drink, but on "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

### **Review 18**

- Old Testament rules about clean and unclean were for ceremonial status and ethnic identity, not health.
- The new covenant is concerned about moral holiness, not dietary or external cleanliness.
- Jesus ignored some of the rules of clean and unclean.
- If God can cleanse people, can he also declare all foods clean?
- Is diet a disputed matter? How can the church avoid controversies about health and diet?

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### **Unclean and common**

Why did Peter use both “unclean” (*akathartos*) and “common” (*koinos*)? Some have suggested that *koinos* refers to clean animals made temporarily unclean by proximity to unclean animals. The two words have different root words, but their meanings overlap. *Koinos* was the uncleanness that the Pharisees were concerned about in Mark 7. The verb form of the word, *koinoō* (to make something common), is used in Hebrews 9:13 to refer to the ceremonial uncleanness that had to be cleansed by the water made with the ashes of a red heifer, and the Hebrew word for that is the same word as used for unclean animals. *Koinos* and *akathartos* have basically the same meaning.

The Louw and Nida lexicon lists *koinos* as a synonym of *akathartos*, saying: “It is possible that there is some subtle distinction in meaning, particularly on a connotative level, between *koinos* and *akathartos* in Ac 10.14, but it is difficult to determine the precise differences of meaning on the basis of existing contexts. The two terms are probably used in Ac 10.14 primarily for the sake of emphasis.” Such repetition, using similar words or phrases, was a common Jewish form of emphasis.

### **Which word is original?**

The Greek text of Mark 7:19b is disputed. In the text used by the King James translators, the participle “cleansing” seems to be part of the words of Jesus. In this version, Jesus says, “Foods cannot make people unclean, since they go through the body, thus purifying all foods.” In this version, Jesus is talking about the digestive system and elimination.

There are two problems with this textual version and interpretation. First, the New Testament does not use the word *katharizō* with the meaning of “purge” in any other passage. It normally refers to cleansing in a religious sense, either through ceremonies or by a cleansing of the conscience through forgiveness. The context in this passage is ceremonial cleansing. Second, the digestive process and bowel movements can get rid of dirt, but soil particles were not the concern of the Pharisees. The context is ceremonial cleanness, and the digestive process cannot make anyone or anything religiously clean.

The Greek text used in most manuscripts, and used by most translations, differs by only one Greek letter from that used by the King James translators. One version has the letter omicron; the other has an omega. The different letter links the participle “cleansing” with the “he” in verse 18. The thought is this: “He said [most of verses 18-19], cleansing all foods.” Thus verse 19b is not Jesus’ words but Mark’s comment about the significance of what Jesus had said. That is why many translations place verse 19b outside the quotation marks. The Greek text they are using requires this. Mark explains that Jesus’ principle can be applied to all foods, including meats.

The text of verse 19b is debatable, but our understanding of clean and unclean meats does not depend on this one word. The broader context is Jesus’ teaching that foods do not defile people. Under the new covenant, pork does not cut anyone off from God. Paul echoed Jesus’ words when he wrote that all foods are clean. Many Christians accept Mark 7:15-19 (in either textual version) as clear evidence that all meats may be eaten.