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MINISTRIES

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Should Christians Keep the Bible’s Food Laws?

Does God care about what we eat? Well, in the Bible, God gives laws that tell us not to eat meat from certain animals. These laws are found in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14). According to these laws, things like pork and shellfish are off the menu. They are called *unclean*. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, these meats are called *akathartos*, which literally means “impure” or “unclean” (BDAG 4th ed., ἀκάθαρτος).

So, it appears that God *does* care about what we eat. He doesn’t want us eating anything that is *akathartos* or unclean. But *why* does he care? God commands his people to be “holy”—that is, separate from the world and devoted to him (Leviticus 11:44-45; Deuteronomy 14:2). This command to be holy appears in Leviticus 11, which is all about which animals can and cannot be eaten:

Leviticus 11:44

For I am the LORD [YHWH] your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.

The apostle Peter echoes this command:

1 Peter 1:15-16

But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

So, as Christians, we should be holy in *all* aspects of our lives, including what we eat. That is why God gave laws concerning food.

However, many people today think God’s food laws are no longer important. They point to several scriptures that seem to indicate this. For instance, in Mark 7, Jesus said that nothing that goes into a person can defile him. In Romans 14, Paul said that nothing is unclean. And in Acts 10, Peter received a vision where he was explicitly told to eat unclean animals. Based on these passages, many believe that God’s food laws have been done away with. They think we can eat whatever we want.

But are these passages really telling us that we can eat unclean meats? Are they really telling us that we can eat things that God considers *akathartos*? Well, actually they are not. It turns out that there are two Greek words in the New Testament that are translated as “unclean.” One is *akathartos*, which refers to things like pork and shellfish—that is, things that are prohibited by God’s Law, and that God says we should avoid eating in order to be holy. But there is another word that is sometimes translated as “unclean”—that is the word *koinos*. *Koinos* means “common” or “defiled” (BDAG 4th ed., “κοινός”).

Jewish tradition held that foods could become “defiled” or *koinos* when they came into contact with certain things or certain people (See Colin House, “Defilement by Association: Some Insights From the usage of KOINOS/KOINOY in Acts 10 and 11,” *AUSS* (1983), Vol. 21, No. 2: 143-153). So, some Jewish groups in the first century, like the Pharisees, avoided not just foods that were *akathartos*—that is, foods prohibited by God’s Law—but also foods that were *koinos*, that is foods that have been “defiled” according to their extrabiblical tradition.

Jesus, Peter, and Paul were not saying that we don’t have to obey God’s food laws. They were saying that we don’t have to obey extrabiblical traditions about food.

Consider Mark chapter 7. In this chapter, the Pharisees criticize Jesus’s disciples for rejecting a “tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:2). They say, “[Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled \[*koinos*\] hands?](#)” (Mark 7:5) Because of their traditions, the Pharisees thought that touching food with *koinos* hands made the food *koinos*, which then made the person *koinos* when he ate it. The term *akathartos*, meaning meats prohibited by God’s Law, is not used anywhere in this passage. The controversy had nothing to do with Jesus or his disciples rejecting God’s food laws. In fact, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of “rejecting” and “nullifying” the commandments of God for the sake of their traditions (Mark 7:8-9, 13). It wouldn’t make any sense for Jesus to criticize the Pharisees for rejecting God’s commandments while at the same time rejecting them himself! So, in Mark 7, Jesus did not reject God’s food laws; he rejected the tradition that a person became defiled if he ate food that was touched with defiled hands.

What about Romans 14? Here, Paul says, “[I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean \[*koinos*\] in itself, but it is unclean \[*koinos*\] for anyone who thinks it unclean \[*koinos*\]](#)” (Romans 14:14). Again, the word being translated as “unclean” here is not *akathartos*. Paul is not addressing meats prohibited by God’s Law. Rather, Paul is talking about *clean* meat that was being sold in the Roman marketplace. Some Jewish believers refused to eat this meat because they thought it was “defiled” or *koinos*. Why did they think it was defiled? Because it was handled by Gentiles.

But remember, Jesus rejected this tradition. He said that *koinos* hands cannot make the food or the person who eats it defiled. And here, Paul also rejects this tradition. He says that nothing is *koinos*. However, he wants Jews and Gentiles to fellowship together, even if some of the Jews have traditions that he disagrees with. So, he encourages those he calls “strong”—those who agree with Jesus’s teachings about *koinos*—to accommodate those he calls “weak” (Romans 14:2; 15:1). For the sake of unity, he tells the “strong” to avoid eating meat bought from the Gentile marketplace in front of people who believe it to be *koinos*, even though in reality there is no such thing as food that is *koinos*.

This is similar to things we do out of respect for each other today. Even though the Bible does not prohibit drinking alcohol, it would be best to avoid drinking alcohol in the presence of a believer who is a recovering alcoholic. That believer has a weakness to alcohol, even though the Bible permits it. So, too, in Paul’s time there were believers who had a weakness when it came to this tradition of *koinos*. Paul was not saying that the Bible’s food laws were optional or irrelevant; he was saying that these

extrabiblical traditions were optional. He encourages his readers to abide by these traditions only when they are fellowshiping with the “weak.” Paul gave this instruction because he wanted Jews and Gentiles to have unity.

So, then, what about Acts 10? In that chapter, Peter is shown a sheet filled with animals, and a voice tells him to “kill and eat” (Acts 10:11-13). Peter responds, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common [*koinos*] or unclean [*akathartos*]” (Acts 10:14). So, here both words, *koinos* and *akathartos* are used. Well, then, it seems like God is telling Peter to “kill and eat” animals that are *akathartos* here. That pretty much settles the matter, doesn’t it? Doesn’t that mean that God is okay with us eating unclean animals?

Well, not so fast. Actually, God was *not* telling Peter to eat the *unclean* animals in the sheet. He was telling him to eat the *koinos*—that is, the *common*—animals. Verse 15 says, “What God has made clean, do not call common [*koinos*].” You see, Peter thought that he could not eat the clean animals in the sheet because they were together with the unclean animals. He thought that the clean animals had become *koinos* or defiled. But that was not the case. God was telling him that these animals were clean even though they were surrounded by uncleanness. But the most critical thing about this is that this vision wasn’t about animals at all. As we learn later on in the passage, this vision actually had to do with people (Acts 10:28). God wanted Peter to quit thinking that he was “defiled” if he hung out with Gentiles. The vision showed Peter that the social divisions between Jews and Gentiles were entirely man-made. As Peter said, “God has shown me that I should not call any person common [*koinos*] or unclean [*akathartos*]” (Acts 10:28). Peter’s vision had nothing to do with abolishing God’s food laws. It had to do with accepting Gentiles as full members of the kingdom of God, rather than as unclean second-class citizens.

So, does God care about what we eat? Yes he does. There are two full chapters of the Bible devoted to telling us what to eat and not to eat, and the passages that seem to contradict those chapters do not actually contradict them at all. The Bible does not argue against God’s food laws; it argues against extrabiblical traditions that formed unnecessary barriers between Jews and Gentiles. At 119 Ministries, we have several in-depth teachings that take a detailed look at this topic if you want to study it further. We would invite you to check out our video library at testeverything.net.

Like Peter, we encourage you to “be holy” in all aspects of life, including what you eat. It may seem like a small thing, but we should be faithful in the small things as well as the big things. After all, Jesus encouraged his followers to do and teach even “the least” of the commandments (Matthew 5:19).

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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