

Clean and Unclean

In the Old Testament, Christ gave various laws to the nation of Israel. Some were civil, some ceremonial, some religious, and some hygienic. The laws that applied to diet were designed to preserve life and health:

Signs of the Times, March 21, 1878:

God forbade the eating of unclean beasts, not to exercise an arbitrary authority, but to preserve the life and health of his people. In order for them to retain their faculties of mind and body, it was necessary that their blood should be kept pure, by eating simple, healthful food. He therefore specified the animals least objectionable for food.

By making a distinction between clean and unclean animals, the Israelites were given an opportunity to make moral judgments in the area of practical life. They could exercise their will to choose the good. By choosing the best food available, they were preserving their strength for service to God and man.

Food and Faith

These food laws were not a replacement for a pure heart, but were designed to provide an atmosphere where holiness could thrive and grow. The health aspect of these laws was to keep the blood pure. Healthy blood is needed for the faculties of the mind to make clear decisions. By making religion a part of everyday life, God wanted an intimate working relationship with His people. He wanted them to see and experience that:

1 Timothy 4

⁸ ...godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.

Holiness is not a straight-jacket that you put on once a week! It is not attained by a monk-like existence of seclusion from the world. But it is simply living out the will of God, and

judging between right and wrong, in the daily practices of everyday life.

Legalism Covers Sin

But the natural man is always looking for a fig-leaf garment to cover the nakedness of his soul while retaining his sinful lusts. So questions would arise that should never have been asked, such as,

“Just how far can I walk on the Sabbath day before it is classed as work?”

Rather than submit the will to God, and walk as much or as little as He would require for us to minister mercy to others, it was more pleasing to the flesh to not submit to God, but rather make a rule instead. Thus the sinner could keep his sin, yet make a show of serving God, to make himself feel better.

This kind of religion fostered pride. Instead of helping men divide between clean and unclean, such a religion left them with unclean hearts, thinking all the while that they were clean. Thus the whole point of the clean/unclean distinctions was lost and wasted on them.

Signs of the Times, March 21, 1878

The leading Jews who delighted in teaching and in administering the law, carried the prohibitions of God to unreasonable lengths, making life a burden of ceremonies and restrictions. They carried the regulations of eating and drinking so far that the mind was kept on a continual strain in discriminating between what was considered clean and unclean, and in following out the multitude of injunctions imposed by the priests. All the water was strained lest the presence of the smallest speck or insect might render it unclean, and therefore unfit to use. They were in constant fear of infringing upon customs and traditions which were taught to them as portions of the law.

This was why Jesus proclaimed to the Jewish leaders:

Luke 11

³⁹ Now do ye Pharisees make clean the outside of the cup and the platter; but your inward part is full of ravening and wickedness.

Not Arbitrary Distinctions

The ceremonial laws concerning clean and unclean foods were not merely arbitrary distinctions. We know this because there were always dietary instructions given by God, since the beginning, even well before the Jewish nation was established.

For example:

- At creation, fruit-bearing seeds were given for man's diet.
- After the fall, the "herb of the field" was added.
- After the flood, animals were added, although I'm sure this meant "clean" animals, as there was already a distinction made between "clean" and "unclean" when Noah was gathering the animals into the ark.

These distinctions were more clearly written down in *Leviticus*, but they already had existed, and were passed down orally up until that point.

God wasn't just making arbitrary distinctions between animals for some unknown mystical reason:

Baker's Evangelical Dictionary:

Certain unclean animals are known to transfer diseases to humans: the pig bears trichinosis; the hare, tularemia; carrion-eating birds, various diseases. Eating animal suet is now known to lead to heart disease.

Roland K. Harrison, Introduction to the Old Testament, 1999, p. 603:

The classification of animal species into clean and unclean categories (Lev. 11:1-47) is significant because, being part of the Pentateuchal medical code, it constituted the basis of dietary regulations that are still adhered to by orthodox Jews

and by those Gentiles who are concerned with maintaining good physical health.

This categorizing is also important in view of the fact that it is unique in the annals of Near Eastern literature because its emphasis is not so much upon the avoidance of magical practices associated with certain animal species as upon the positive delineation of dietary principles intended to insure the physical well-being of the individual and the nation alike through a consistent approach.

Applied by the Early Church

In the time of the early church, the nation of Israel, as God's chosen people, was passing away:

The Old Testament sanctuary service and priesthood was replaced by Jesus Christ, our High Priest, ministering in the sanctuary in heaven with His risen saints. A change of priesthood meant a change of law (*Hebrews 7:12*).

As well, the new church wanted nothing to do with the "traditions" and "customs" invented by the Jewish leaders.

And finally, some ceremonies given by God, like circumcision which was originally a symbol of righteousness by faith, had become twisted into a symbol of righteousness by works.

So the time for change had come. But what laws were affected? Many modern Christians have assumed that all the laws outlined in the books of Moses were put away and have no application to us.

But the early church did not apply the Bible that way. When they had a dispute over how much of the Jewish law the Gentiles should keep, they did not say, "none!" Instead their counsel was as follows:

Acts 15

²⁰ But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.

Abstinence from “things strangled, and from blood” was an application of one of the Old Testament dietary restrictions:

Leviticus 7

²⁶ Moreover you shall eat no manner of blood, whether it be of fowl or of beast, in any of your dwellings.

²⁷ Whatsoever soul it be that eats any manner of blood, even that soul shall be cut off from his people.

Leviticus 17

¹² Therefore I said unto the children of Israel, No soul of you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger that sojourns among you eat blood.

¹³ And whatsoever man there be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, which hunts and catches any beast or fowl that may be eaten; he shall even pour out the blood thereof, and cover it with dust.

¹⁴ For it is the life of all flesh; the blood of it is for the life thereof: therefore I said unto the children of Israel, You shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh: for the life of all flesh is the blood thereof: whosoever eats it shall be cut off.

Was this law reinforced because it was based on a matter of hygiene, or was it a concession to the Jewish believers, whose conscience was troubled by the eating of blood because of their regard for the ceremonial laws?

It doesn't really matter which way you take it, as long as it is understood that the underlying principle is love. If eating of blood was an unhealthy practice, then it is love to God, expressed in care for the body temple, to avoid it. If the blood is not unhealthy, then it is love to my neighbor, expressed in care for his tender conscience, that guides me to avoid it. In either case, love is the principle. And so it must be today.

Love fulfills the law. It does so in such a way as to go well beyond the surface understanding.

The Lesson Reinforced

In the New Testament, *Romans 14* and *1 Corinthians 8*, there was an issue over the eating of meats offered to idols.

Like the prophet Daniel of old, the believers wanted to show that they did not participate with idol worship. The prophet Daniel did this by refusing to eat the king's meat. But the problem for the early Christians was with the meat which was often sold in the market place: they did not know if it had been offered to idols or not.

Some, whose consciences were more sensitive, thought that they should avoid all meat that might have been offered to idols, whether they knew or not. Others thought, if they didn't know, then it wasn't a sin. Paul agreed with this, that idols are nothing, and therefore the meat itself wasn't polluted by this. But instead of approving friction between the believers, he told them that love would do what was best for the other.

So often we think of the law with respect to ourselves: What must I do? What are my rights? What does God expect of me? This can lead to a self-centered view of the law.

But love puts the others first: How can I help others? How can I protect the rights of others? What does God expect me to do for others? This is the real intent of the law. This is the character of God.

Are They Really Clean?

Now, let us consider the hygiene aspect for a moment. If the unclean animals of Scripture were all made "clean" in the New Testament, as some seem to interpret those statements (*Luke 11:41, Romans 14:14, Acts 10:15*), then why are some animals still a source of dangerous diseases? Didn't Jesus clean them good enough?!

Defiling the Temple

But beyond this, in our day even the animals classified as "clean" may no longer be suitable for food.

The greater dangers come from the way animals are raised (in factory farms), and the drugs and unnatural food sources they are subject to, because money, and not health, are the motivating factors behind big corporations. Should we expose our body temple to their merchandising schemes?

What did Jesus do when the earthly temple was defiled by money-making traffic? He cleansed it. Then what would He want us to do with our body temple when it is threatened with foods that are produced for money and not for health? Cleanse them away. “Make not My Father’s house a house of merchandise” (*John* 2:16).

Furthermore, regarding the factory farms, should we support such an exploitative and abusive treatment of innocent animals, so that they live as in a prison, without the joy and freedom of a life in nature and the open air? We can hardly expect that God delights in the unnecessary killing of animals when in His new earth “they shall not hurt or destroy” (*Isaiah* 65:25).

This is simply the principle of love, for if we make ourselves sick by the food we eat, then the right that others have to our service is hindered. Love “seeks not it’s own” (*1 Corinthians* 13:5). It is not my appetite or tastes that are of the greatest importance, but my strength to serve God and man.

Robbing the Poor

There are also other issues which involve the principle of love. It takes approximately 10 times more land and energy to raise animals for food. The crops to feed these animals are raised on land that could feed many times more if they were devoted to crops for people. Sometimes the animal food crops come from poor countries who can’t even feed their own population. But because the land is held by rich businessmen, they sell the crops to rich countries to make money.

In a world of 1 billion malnourished people, can we morally demand that our appetites be satisfied at the expense of others going hungry and dying? Can we, with a good conscience, support this robbery of the mouths of the poor? How must these people feel as they watch their children dying of hunger while we sit fat and over-fed with the bounty from their lands?

By not participating in these unjust practices, we can avoid the guilt. A simple solution is to adopt a vegetarian diet. If all would do this, the flow of food from the poor countries would stop.

Destroying the Earth

But there are more reasons. Raising of animals for food generates more greenhouse gases than all automobiles combined. The changing climate is also affecting food supplies and human health. What would love compel us to do about this?

Romans 14

¹⁵ But if your brother is grieved with your meat, you do not walk charitably. Do not destroy him with your meat, for whom Christ died.

Love is to be the primary motivating factor. It is not a selfish interpretation of certain food restriction laws that we need, but the living principle of love. This will find expression even in the area of diet, because diet affects not just the health of my body temple, but the health and survival of others on this crowded planet.

How will love express itself when faced with these global issues?

1 Corinthians 8

¹³ Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world stands, lest I make my brother to offend.

Love will prompt us to make dietary changes, not to prove our righteousness, but to show mercy to others: both men and animals.