

# The Diet Challenge

Readings: Leviticus 11:1-23; 1Peter 1:13-19 ; Mark 7:14-21

Food, glorious food. Our culture is obsessed by food, our reading, watching and well our eating are dominated by the how, what, where of food with a bewildering and widening set of choices.

Given this love of eating and desire for choice our Leviticus reading today gives us a real diet challenge as God restricts the food that the Israelites are allowed to eat. We may want to gloss over these ancient food laws as historically interesting but practically irrelevant, but at the very least it should push us to think Christianly about food, something I don't think I have every done before looking at this chapter.

So, with that thought as our aperitif, we will for our starter consider the substance of the Levitical food laws, main course we will be the meatier subject of why they were given in the context of the Bible, and for dessert what this means for us today.

## STARTER: THE OLD TESTAMENT FOOD LAWS (LEVITICUS 11)

So, for our starter, the food laws in the Old Testament. Let's get Levitical and us hear the Bible talk. God tells Moses and Aaron that there are only some animals that the Israelites can eat. Of the land animals they can eat those animals that chew the cud and have a split hoof, such as cows, sheep and goats, but camels, rabbits and most famously pigs fail the test. Of sea creatures they can eat animals that have scales and fins, leaving out shell fish, crustaceans and so on. A list of proscribed birds is given, generally birds of prey. Insects are out, except if you are a bit peckish you can have a locust or grasshopper, those insects designed to jump. What they can eat is clear, as is what to do when these laws are breached, or if they touch dead animals, usually washing and being recognised as unclean till evening that meant not participating in worship at the tabernacle. They were in effect alienated from God until evening.

Type	Standard	Unclean	Reason?
Animals	Parted or cloven hoof and chews the cud, eg. cattle, sheep, goats	Camel, rock badger, hare, pig	Do not fit the standard. Also if it can be sacrificed, generally, it can be eaten
Fish	Has fins and scales	Shellfish etc.	Do not fit the standard
Birds	Not defined, so generally all birds, with these exceptions	Eagle, vulture, kite, owls, bat etc.	Not explained but assumed association with blood, as carrion eaters
Insects	Flying, hopping insects eg. grasshoppers	Winged, walking insects	Perhaps plant eating. Also not confused in movement.
Swarming things	Not allowed at all	Mice, rats, lizards etc.	Movements are "abnormal", slithery, or rapid

If we are to understand these rules we need to consider what the Bible has already said about food, and this is about food, there is nothing wrong with these animals as such. You could ride a camel and remain clean at least on the inside, the problem was if you fancied eating one.

In Genesis 1:29 humanity is told that God gives them for food every seed bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. This perhaps explains why there are no vegetable restrictions here. Sorry kids but vegetables are definitely in! But in Genesis 9:3 after the flood God says to humanity that "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave the green plants, I

now give you everything.” Only blood, the life blood is banned, These rules in Leviticus then are a subset of what God has given humanity, they are special rules for his special people.

## **MAIN COURSE: BE HOLY, BECAUSE I AM HOLY**

### **Why Israel had to keep them**

This leads to our main course, why did God give these rules. An answer that is often given is that it was to disassociate themselves from animals that had religious significance in the religions of their neighbours. This may be true of the pig, but is hard to argue with prawns. Also cows and bulls were a major part of pagan rituals yet these can be eaten, as well as sacrificed.

A particularly popular idea especially for us health conscious moderns is that God gave these laws to protect his people. Commentaries delight in giving details of diseases and parasites that can be caught from badly cooked pigs, including 24 feet long tape worms, and most of us have probably personal experience with the dangers of seafood. The difficulty here is three-fold. You can catch plenty of diseases from cows, sheep and goat. Further if health was the issue why would Jesus and his disciples teach that all foods are now clean. Perhaps most damagingly for this view is that it suggests that the focus of the food laws was the people, whereas the text gives a much more God focused reason. “I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:45). These rules were because of God's holiness not for his people's health.

God's holiness meant that nothing unclean could come into his presence, and uncleanness had to be dealt with the cleansing and sacrifice, it was not safe for the Holy to meet the unclean. So for God's sake and for his people they were to be holy in all areas of their life. In so doing they showed they ran to a different set of rules than the people around them.

As people of the Creator God of Israel they were to eat those animals that particularly reflected the order of creation, model creatures, particularly shunning dead animals and animals that bore a resemblance to a snake, reflecting the ancient enemy of the people of God. Even as they ate, something they would do everyday they would be reminded that they were saved by God to be his people.

Keeping the food laws then came to be one of the most obvious characteristic of being Jewish.

### **Why we don't have to keep them**

However Jesus challenges the place of the food laws as they had come to take a far greater place in the life of a Jew than they should have done. Jesus has some strong words to say to the Pharisees of his day that it is not what goes into a man that makes him unclean but what comes out of his heart that shows him to be unclean. (Mark 7) The food laws had become misunderstood as a badge of honour rather than a symbol of holiness.

More than this in Jesus life and death on the cross the inconceivable had happened. The Holy God had become fully unclean in death, but by the shedding of his blood the whole world and all people could be reconciled to their creator. His death and resurrection had ripped up the rule book of what it meant to be clean and holy and how God's people were to be defined.

Holiness and being God's people was no longer about external rules such as food laws but by faith in Jesus as risen Lord. So the Church realised that Jesus comments about nothing going into a man can make him unclean meant that Jesus had declared all foods clean (Mark 7). They needed a push into this new way of thinking for they wanted to keep the old ways which would have meant keeping old Jew/ Gentile divisions. Peter is given a vision of all types of animals and to kill and eat and he initially

refuses but God says "Do not call unclean what I have called clean". (Acts 10) This applied to all foods as well as to all people.

Perhaps most tellingly, Paul, the former Pharisee, who would have fanatically kept the food laws can say in Romans 14:14 that no food is unclean in itself.

It is also worth remembering that we remember Jesus sacrifice for us, to which all are welcome, with a meal. It is as we take the bread and wine we are reminded that we who are unclean are made clean by his blood. Food remains a defining characteristic of God's people, sharing in the meal Jesus gave us. This shared meal is our main course.

## **DESSERT: HOLY FOOD FAT MAN**

I am sorry if the main course was a little chewy, and it may have left you with a question, why have we bothered to look at rules that no longer apply to us? The answer is because the rationale behind them still applies to us. The Israelites were saved by a holy God to be holy. The New Testament says that this same rule applies to us. "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."" (1 Peter 1:15-16)

Which bring us to desert, or perhaps cheese platter as it is about being holy. If the Old Testament people had this daily, regular reminder at this basic, fundamental level shouldn't we do the same and think about food and holiness.

The certainly did in the early Church as they wrestled with issues like food offered to idols. Now it is not as if modern Christians have not thought about a Christian approach to food. Books on the subject ranging from the alarming "Slim for Him" (which confuses dieting with discipleship), the unintentionally amusing "What would Jesus Eat" with cook book (how hard can fish, bread and wine be?), to the fascinating "The God of Thinness: Gluttony and other Weighty Matters." (All real titles) But, from the Bible, how are we to think about food, how can we be holy as we eat, how can we show that we are Christians in relation to food. I offer the following reflections

### **Life is in the blood**

The first thought and perhaps most controversially is in relation to the ethics of eating meat. Whilst the food laws have in general been superseded the restriction related to blood was not, indeed was reaffirmed in Acts 15 at the council of Jerusalem. This was because blood was about life. When we eat meat, a God given life has been given for us. In Leviticus any animal that was slaughtered was done in the context of sacrifice, which gave their death significance and dignity even holiness. Every time you ate meat it would be done with a vivid and visual reminder of the death that allowed this meal, and that it was done in the presence of the God who gave life.

Have we in our modern world completely become blasé to that cost? Have we lost something important in our prepacked supermarket butchery? This is not an argument for vegetarianism but particularly in the current concern around the environmental cost of the meat trade we should treat the meat with more sanctity and seek to minimise waste.

### **Hospitality**

The meat produced by Levitical sacrifice was to be shared which points us to hospitality. As you read the New Testament and life of Jesus we can see that hospitality should a fundamental Christian characteristic. This was to particularly to those who were outsiders or could not reciprocate, see the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46) Most excitingly heaven is most often pictured as God being hospitable to us, inviting us to a great heavenly banquet.

Do we willingly share food, do you have a generous spirit. Take the Tim Tam test. In a room of 12 people a pack of Tim Tams is opened, which contain only 11, do you make sure everyone has one before you. It may sound trivial but it is worth thinking about (I think I would fail the test.) Do we look for opportunities to share food with

others, it can be a wonderful way of deepening relationships as well as being an opportunity for the gospel of Jesus.

This needs to be done in a way that is sensitive of others, something the New Testament spends a lot of time on. It is easy to see why this may have been a problem when the Gentile Christians tucked into their bacon sarnies when Jewish Christians were present. We don't have time to develop this idea fully today but the idea still applies, our hospitality must be suitable to our guests not our own sensibilities. Christians should be marked, be shown to be holy, different, by our generous sensitive hospitality.

### **Gluttony & Fasting**

But thinking about eating can led to gluttony, something the scriptures condemn. (Proverbs 23:21). A glutton, according to a French proverb, is a man who digs his grave with his teeth. Glutton can be truly a deadly sin as our culture is learning far too late. But again in the Bible the concern is much more God focused. One of the marks of being holy, according to 1Peter 1:13 is to be self controlled, the human mind informed by the will of God is to be in control not our wants, our desires. The glutton is not self controlled, he is controlled by his stomach.

Now this does not mean avoiding food and drink, Jesus certainly enjoyed his food, he could even be accused of being a drunkard and glutton (Matthew 11:9), but it may be worth us wondering how much control we have over our eating.

Fasting has traditionally been a way of reminding the body who was in charge and it may be something that could be helpfully used as a spiritual discipline, certainly Jesus did it, as did Paul and many Christians throughout history. When I worked in London my team was taken out to the most fancy restaurant I have ever been to, the food was fantastic, stunning, but it was lunch time in Ramadan and BJ a Muslim colleague of mine sat their drinking water. I don't agree with the reasons why he did it but it was extremely impressive. Have you ever tried it, could you do it? Are you in control?

I am not trying to lay down a law, such as all Christians should fast so many days a week, for some this would be medically unsafe, but trying to raise the issue of who is in charge. Could you take this diet challenge?

Please note that I am not talking here about being overweight or dieting. The Bible is clear about gluttony, it says nothing about girth, or body shape, and certainly there is no God given diet plan. Rather this is about reminding ourselves of our dedication to God, and that he is our Lord, not our stomachs and tastebuds. Practicing abstinence would remind us that we are not to worry about food, and that there is more to life than food (Matthew 6)

### **GRACE**

I put those ideas forward for you to contemplate as our sermonic meal comes to an end, but as it does I realise something dreadful, I have forgotten to say grace.

If there is one thing that should characterise the Christian believer in their relationship with food it should be thankfulness. Throughout the Bible it is God who gives food, captured well in "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing." (Psalms 145:15-16).

Paul argues with Pagans that the provision of food is part of God's testimony to his grace and his mercy (Acts 14:17). Jesus in all four gospels gave thanks in all four gospels. Paul gave thanks before he ate (Acts 27:35) do we?

Now it seems to me that saying grace before eating a meal has fallen on hard times recently seen perhaps as legalistic, dull, unnecessary, but it should be our gracious response each meal time to all the good we have experienced at God's hand, a

way of reminding ourselves that we have been saved to be holy and even looking forward to the great heavenly banquet that God is preparing for his people. What would stop you saying grace? It is hard to find arguments against it. Christians should be marked as people who say grace. There are countless ways of saying it, they can be short, long, funny, serious, but let us be marked as people who are grateful for all that God gives us. So I would like to say grace.

### **Grace**

Gracious God our Creator and Sustainer, to you be all thanks and praise.

We praise you for the garden of the earth, filled with all manner of things that are pleasing to the eye and delightful to the tongue.

We thank you for the capacity to savour food with pleasure and gratitude and pray for the wisdom to know when we have had our fill.

We pray that we will work to share what we have that all may be heartily fed.

We offer our thanks and praise in the name of Jesus our saviour, who frees us to enjoy all your good gifts and will bring us to your great heavenly banquet when we will feast on the fullness of your gracious presence. Amen.