

Clean and Unclean Meats

The Real Poison of Biblical Dietary Laws and "Health Secrets"

Peter Ditzel

Is the Bible a health manual? Are the dietary laws found in the Bible God's ways of telling us what is healthy and unhealthy to eat? Or did God have an entirely different reason for putting these laws in the Bible? What's more, do these laws given to ancient Israel have anything at all to do with Christians today?

Herbert W. Armstrong, the late founder and "apostle" of the Worldwide Church of God, taught that Christians must obey the laws of clean and unclean meats found in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. On page 18 of *Principles of Healthful Living*, he wrote: "This is a basic law—a revelation from God to man about which kinds of flesh will properly digest and assimilate in the human system, and which will not" (*Principles of Healthful Living* [Pasadena, CA: Worldwide Church of God, Chapter Three 1958, 1978; Chapter Four 1979], version 1.0, May 1990 printing).

As might be expected, most of the splinter groups of the Worldwide Church of God that continue to follow Armstrong's teachings have their requisite publications on clean and unclean meats. More surprising, perhaps, is the number of others—including physicians, dieticians, and cooks—who have written popular books that claim to reveal the health secrets God has stashed into the pages of the Bible. And, being the narcissistic, health-crazed society we are, these books sell well. In fact, it has become common for many Christians who do not strictly follow the Old Testament dietary laws to nevertheless think of them as health guidelines. They believe the meats listed as unclean in the Old Testament are not as healthful as other meats, and they also think that the Bible contains many other health secrets.

Is the Bible a Health Manual?

Although medical reports have occasionally linked some, but not all, unclean meats to health problems (trichinosis from improperly cooked pork, food poisoning from shellfish caught in polluted waters, and so forth), they have also linked clean meats to health problems (elevated cholesterol levels from chicken eggs, salmonella poisoning from improperly cooked poultry, cancer possibly caused by consumption of beef, etc.).

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Also consider this question: If God was concerned with telling us which meats are healthy and which are not, why did He not also identify for us the varieties of poisonous plants? The answer lies in the fact that, despite the claims of some authors, the Bible is not a health or safety manual. For example, it does not tell us how to determine whether water is safe to drink, what the basic food groups are and how much we should eat of each to remain healthy, that excessive exposure to the sun increases the risk of skin cancer, and many other matters that we would consider important to health. These facts are among the physical knowledge God has left for humans to discover.

But other scriptures are also sometimes cited as God's instructions on health and hygiene. Are they? Let's examine a couple.

Some—including the followers of Herbert Armstrong (*Principles of Healthful Living*, p. 11)—will cite Deuteronomy 23:12-13 as one of God's teachings on hygiene. These verses read: "Thou shalt have a place also without the camp, whither thou shalt go forth abroad: And thou shalt have a paddle upon thy weapon; and it shall be, when thou wilt ease thyself abroad, thou shalt dig therewith, and shalt turn back and cover that which cometh from thee."

Surely this seems to be a rule of hygiene. Many who have camped in the wilderness would agree that this is a good practice. But what does the Bible say is the reason for this rule? "For the LORD thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp, to deliver thee, and to give up thine enemies before thee; therefore shall thy camp be holy: that he see no unclean thing in thee, and turn away from thee" (verse 14). This law concerns ritual purity—a physical type or shadow of holiness—during times of war (see verse 9). This rule is not given for the camp during times of peace.

Notice also that these verses are subsequent to verses 10-11, rules that are ritual in nature as can be seen by the fact that the man was to remain outside of the camp until sunset. Such physical uncleanness represented sin and defilement that would separate Israel from God.

Leviticus 13 and 14 are also popular with those who believe God has given us health rules. Are the instructions in these chapters medical rules given to prevent the spread of leprosy and effect its cure? No. Speaking of the word leprosy as it is used in the Bible, the *New Unger's Bible Handbook* explains, "Leprosy refers not only to Hansen's Disease (modern leprosy) but also to various skin diseases (eg., psoriasis, vitiligo, scabies, etc.). Some have even linked the condition to various venereal diseases. Leprosy...illustrates the results of sin. The leper was excluded from the camp, [verses] 45-46. The believer who permits indwelling sin to work in him is similarly unfit for

fellowship with God or His people." The instructions concerning skin diseases were to teach a lesson about sin through a physical example.

Uncleanness was ritualistic and the laws concerning clean and unclean meats were no exception. They are unrelated to health.

The authority we must look to if we are to properly understand the Old Testament dietary laws is the Word of God, the Bible. The Bible never even hints that these laws have anything to do with health. The Hebrew word God used to describe an animal that is unclean refers to a ritual state of impurity. It applies to the animal and to the person who comes into contact with the animal.

Examining the context of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, as well as other so-called health and hygiene scriptures (such as Deuteronomy 23:12-13 and Leviticus 13 and 14), reveals that they are concerned with ritual uncleanness and ritual purity. In Leviticus 11, for example, contact with an unclean animal makes a person or an article unclean, and a ritual is prescribed. But if God meant that these foods make us sick, He would have to prescribe a remedy, not a ritual. Those who look for health secrets in the Bible are groveling around in the shadows. They miss the fact that ritual uncleanness was a type of sin, and the ritual for cleansing was merely a type of the real cleansing from sin accomplished by Jesus Christ. We are to look for Jesus Christ in the Bible, not trifling health secrets.

The Declaration of Jesus Christ

Now let's examine the most decisive teaching on this subject. It is found in the New Testament, in Mark 7. The Pharisees found fault with Jesus' disciples for eating without having first ceremonially washed their hands. Jesus answered by criticizing the Pharisees' strict obedience to such traditions while not properly caring for their parents.

Then Jesus made a statement to the people. It is found in verse 15: "There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man."

This was a revolutionary teaching for all Jews, including Jesus' disciples. They asked him about it privately. I will first give Jesus' answer as it appears in the King James Version to show why some have misunderstood it: "And he saith unto them, Are ye so without understanding also? Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him; Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats?" (verses 18-19).

The ending of verse 19 is unclear in the King James Version. "Purging all meats" seems to be part of what Jesus said and can therefore be taken as referring to a part of the digestive process. But this is not so. Mark's quotation of Jesus' words ends with the word "draught." "Purging all meats" is Mark's explanation, written more than thirty years after Jesus' death and resurrection when the church had come to understand this principle.

Other translations make this much clearer. Read verses 18-19 in the *English Standard Version*: "And he said to them, 'Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?' (Thus he declared all foods clean.)"

Confused by his error that the laws of clean and unclean flesh pertain to healthful and unhealthful meats, Herbert W. Armstrong tried to explain Mark 7 by saying that Jesus was only making a statement about spiritual defilement, but was not addressing clean or unclean meats. Writing in *Principles of Healthful Living*, Armstrong maintains, "Specifically, on the physical level, He was referring (verse 19) to a possible particle of dirt which might get on the food from dirty and unwashed hands—He was not here speaking of clean or unclean meats at all."

But as we have just read in the Bible, Jesus was clearly talking about more than just eating with unwashed hands. As I will explain, he was talking about the definition of unclean. And if Jesus' words are not lucid enough, Mark's commentary is crystal clear. Armstrong's explanation simply doesn't hold water when compared to the explicit meaning of these verses.

Those who teach that the laws of clean and unclean meats concern whether the flesh of certain animals is fit or healthy to be eaten are left with three possible conclusions: 1) Jesus declared all meats clean and by doing so changed the structure of unclean animals' flesh, 2) Jesus declared all meats clean and by doing so changed the human digestive system to be compatible with unclean animals' flesh, or 3) Jesus did not declare all meats clean and we ought to still follow the laws of clean and unclean meats.

Herbert W. Armstrong chose the third conclusion. He writes, "No change was ever made in the structure of men's bodies.... Neither did God make some sudden change in the structure of animal flesh" (pp. 19-20).

What Armstrong failed to see is that no such physical change was needed. When Jesus declared all meats clean, he was simply changing the definition of unclean. No longer did unclean refer to the flesh of certain animals, whether one ate with unwashed hands, whether a man had a nocturnal emission or a woman was having a menstrual flow, etc. Unclean now took on

only its true meaning: the meaning these physical types only pictured. It came to exclusively mean defiled with sin—sinful thoughts, words, actions.

Peter

As with circumcision, the opening of salvation to the Gentiles, and other matters, the church did not immediately understand the change Jesus had made to the definition of unclean. This explains why Peter, in Acts 10, did not instantly comprehend both the primary meaning of his vision—that Gentiles were not to be considered unclean and that God had opened salvation to them—and its secondary implication that all meats are clean. God would not have tempted Peter to eat what was unlawful. He taught Peter that Gentiles were acceptable by showing him that unclean animals were acceptable. Peter used the same words, impure (*koinos*) and unclean (*akathartos*), to describe both unclean animals and Gentiles (verses 14 and 28). God has made both unclean animals and Gentiles clean.

Romans 14

If you read what Paul teaches in Romans 14, you will see that it can be expressed this way: Eat what you want and don't eat what you don't want, but keep your beliefs to yourselves without condemning others or teaching them your faith-weakening beliefs. Notice clearly that it is the brother who does not eat "who is weak" (verse 2). Being concerned that God will condemn for what one eats shows a weakness of faith. Paul tolerated such beliefs as long as they were not being spread to others.

Nevertheless, Galatians and Colossians 2 show us that when the ascetics, legalists and others weak in faith started teaching people to follow their ways, Paul was quick to crack down on them and expose their teachings as false.

Living in Fear

God is not looking over the shoulders of Christians waiting to condemn them to hell fire for eating a ham sandwich or crab salad. Yet, on page 24 of *Principles of Healthful Living*, we read:

What does the Bible say the people would be doing today? Notice: They that eat "swine's flesh"—that is what most people are doing today—"and the abomination, and the mouse, shall be consumed together"—in the wrath of God—"saith the Lord" (Isa. 66:17).

This is the fate of those who lust after the foods that God forbids

us to eat because those meats will harm us. This is the fate of those "whose God is their belly" (Phil. 3:19).

This explains how Herbert W. Armstrong was able to convince thousands of people to obey the laws of clean and unclean meats. Armstrong completely misapplies Isaiah 66:17 and Philippians 3:19, potentially creating fear in his readers when there should be no fear. Isaiah 66:17 is not about average people eating unclean meats. True, eating swine's flesh and mice were abominable when Isaiah wrote the passage. But, as we have seen, this is not true now. The real point of Isaiah 66:17 is that those who defy God in heathen religious practices—"those who consecrate and purify themselves for garden-rites, one after another in a magic ring" (*Revised English Bible*)—will meet their end.

Philippians 3:18-19 reads: "(For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.)"

What does this mean? Paul was writing about people who, instead of having their minds on Christ, had their minds on earthly things, including minding what they ate. It had become a religion to them. Thus, those who teach adherence to the laws of clean and unclean meats are the ones who bear a resemblance to those people "whose God is their belly."

Notice Paul's words in I Timothy 4:1-5:

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

How sad that so many people have accepted teachings that bog them down in the quagmire of legalism. Those who teach that Christians must obey such Old Testament laws are, to paraphrase Paul in Galatians 5:7, cutting in on those who may be sincerely trying to run the Christian race, keeping them from obeying the truth. This is the greatest harm that can be done to anyone. Yet spiritual babes who do not understand the Bible as a whole are every day won over with the simplistic argument, If it's in the Bible, it must be obeyed. This tunnel-vision, flat-theology approach to the Bible isolates

each passage from the overall message of the Bible and from the awesome truth of our freedom in Christ under the New Covenant. As a result, the passages are misunderstood. By teaching a doctrine of legalism, those who believe we must still follow Old Testament dietary laws weaken or even nullify the cross of Christ for those who listen to them. Their doctrine is spiritual poison. We can be justified and saved only through Christ's sacrifice.

The thinking is: I am careful to do all that is required. Therefore, I must be doing well as a Christian. But the Bible gives a completely different picture of the Christian life: "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4).