

## Jesus declared all food clean

Mark 7:1-8, 14-24

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When I was a child, I hated Brussels' Sprouts. My parents forced me to eat at least five sprouts whenever my mother cooked them. I was clever – I was able to each time drop them secretly in my lap, and then I had to go to the kitchen to drink some water so that I could dump the 5 sprouts in the dustbin. My parents never noticed.

Jesus spoke in our Gospel story about food, but the issue of taste was not the question. In the story described by Mark, we read that Jesus declared all food clean. This had to do with ritual cleanliness in accordance with Jewish religious thinking, not with a particular preference for this or that tasty food.

### 1 Not what we eat makes us unclean

Why was this important for Mark, to underline that Jesus declared all food to be okay for eating? Because at the time when Mark wrote these stories, there was much tension in churches between Christians of Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds about this issue of what food was acceptable.

Jews had strict rules for their food, while the gentiles in church ate everything, and this created separation in the churches. Jews tended to separate themselves from those unclean gentiles, even from their fellow followers of Jesus Christ.

Mark underlines: as far as Jesus himself is concerned, it does not matter what you eat. What really matters is not what goes into the belly, but what comes out the heart. True defilement is not a matter of the belly but of the heart.

Mark was St Peter's interpreter - And the Gospel of Mark is a reflection of Mark listening to Peter preaching and teaching about Jesus. And we know that Peter had some important problems with this issue of eating food that was considered ritually unclean by the Jews.

Remember in Acts 10, where Peter gets a vision from God of a tablecloth filled with unclean food. God tell him to eat it. In Acts 10:15 we read of a voice from heaven to Peter: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." If for God it does not matter what you eat, why make an issue of it.

Later, Peter had a major conflict with the apostle Paul because Peter withdrew from eating with gentile Christians because he was criticized for eating with them by Jewish followers of Jesus. You can read this in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

These Jewish Christians argued that this food was unclean. They had not gotten the point yet. But Peter went along with them and thereby he broke relations with those gentile Christians. "I cannot eat with you, your food is unclean."

Imagine someone comes to your home and as soon as you put your best food on the table, he says: I do not want this, I cannot eat with you; it is unclean... God is against it. This is definitely not good for relationships.

The initial vision Peter got of the sheet with unclean food, was meant to prepare him to go into the home of the Roman gentile soldier Cornelius, who was interested in becoming a Christian. Peter later seemed to have forgotten this lesson.

And I find it very interesting that Mark describes that during the discussions Jesus had with the Pharisees and the crowds, Jesus withdrew into the house – his own home most probably.

And after the discussions about cleanliness of food, Jesus went to the gentile area of Tyre, in Lebanon, where, we read, he entered a house. A house of gentiles of course. For Jesus it was just as normal to enter into his own home as it was to enter into the home of gentiles. A good lesson for the early church!

To our ears this sound like just a fact, nothing special. But for Jewish readers at that time, this was highly critical.

For Jesus, community with other people - showing love to people – was more important than what you eat or drink. Never allow what you eat or not eat, to separate you from others.

### 2 Attitude of Jews

But the religious teachers in the days of Jesus totally disagreed. 'First the principle, after that, the person.' The laws, the traditions above all!

We read of Pharisees and Scribes. These Jewish leaders may have joined the group of Jesus because of sincere interest actually. We read that they joined Jesus.

Pharisees were a fundamentalist sect – a movement of all sorts of people, clergy and lay people. They were deeply motivated to obey God and serve him through following the law in its details. And more than the Biblical law, they added their own traditions to that as well.

Scribes were the professional theologians of those days. They could belong to the sect of the Pharisees, or to other movements.

They saw some disciples of Jesus eat without washing their hands and they were upset because according their traditions, the washing of hands was highly important.

It is interesting to note that only some of the disciples did not wash their hands ritually; it seems that Jesus and other disciples did follow the tradition of washing their hands.

The Pharisees reacted upset. "How is it that your disciples do not wash their hands?" You are their rabbi, their master, and you wash your hands but you have no problem that others do not do it?

This washing of hands was a big deal for them, as it was part of the traditions of the Elders. The Elders, those were two Great Jewish Moral and Legal Theolo-

gians, Hillel and Shammai. Those great heroes of the tradition, mediators of the will of God, disagreed about much but not on the religious importance of extensive washings. Without these washing, God would be mad at you.

The traditions of the Jews were mostly about matters of purification, especially about the cleansing of kitchen utensils. Mark explains for his gentile readers, in 7:4, that those Jews washed so many things ritually.

**Read Mark 7:4.**

Imagine how defiled you can be in the marketplace – with all those unclean people everywhere. If good Jews would come home, they had to purify themselves and what they bought in the market. Cups, kettles, all things had to be thoroughly rinsed.

By the way, in Mark 6 – just before what we have read, we see that Jesus went to the marketplaces, where people touched Jesus. **Read Mark 6:56.**

Imagine. Impure sinful people touching Jesus for being healed. Jesus did not ask them first whether they were ritually clean. Those were normal people; of course the crowds were not ritually clean. They did not follow all those laws of God!

And after such experiences some of the disciples ate without purifying themselves. Bread eaten with unwashed hands was considered like excrement by the major rabbis. Hands has to be washed to the wrist to be considered clean, otherwise you had big problems with God.

But Jesus made clear that for God, washing your hands or not, is unimportant. Wash them, or do not wash them. For God it does not matter. The bread is not unclean, the dirt is what leaves the body in the toilet.

This washing of hands was a trivial matter in the eyes of Jesus. So it should have been considered trivial in the early church – but it was a great problem at that time. Hence the importance of this story of Jesus. He made clear that we can never let issues of food, drinks, cultural habits, become a problem between believers.

So why, if Jesus was indifferent to these laws, did he respond so strongly? Could Jesus not have been a bit more accommodating to the Jewish leaders? Could he not have told those few disciples who forgot to wash their hands, come on guys, do not upset the Pharisees, these are nice traditions. Yella, go and wash them...

But instead, Jesus resisted their comments about the washing of hands, and He used it to teach them a lesson. Not only did he make clear that the washing of hands is not important, he even declared all food clean!

Alfred Edersheim, a Messianic Jew, speaks of the “infinite distance between Christ and the teaching of the synagogue”. [Alfred Edersheim, *The life and time of Jesus the Messiah* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), p 485]

Edersheim mentions how many Jews in Jesus’ time even believed that God himself had to be purified sometimes. Did God not go to Egypt to save Israel? So God came in contact with paganism and needed purification. Likewise, after God buried Moses, as he touched

a corpse He immersed himself in a bath of fire, the Jews believed.

A man who ate with unclean hands was, according to these Jewish fairy tales, subject to the attacks of a demon called Shibta. To omit to wash the hands in the proper way made one also subject to poverty and destruction.

So Jesus could not just assume an attitude of indifference to this sort of traditionalism. Much of it was really bad and distant from the word of God. And he used this occasion to bring it home to his followers.

### **3 It is about the heart**

Jesus and those Scribes spoke complete different languages when it came to religion and God. Jesus rejected this whole style of theology and this view of God. He taught a radically new doctrine in Israel. Things cannot be unclean; and things do not make us unclean. Our behaviour and our heart are the things that make us unclean toward God.

In biblical terminology the heart is the centre of a person, the source of every decision that manifests itself through deeds. Some bible translations translate the word that literally means heart – kardia – as mind. Because that it how Jews considered the heart. The center of all thought and decisions.

Traditions are beautiful. They link us to our forefathers and how they lived. Church traditions link us to the earliest churches in history. Jesus does not turn against tradition in itself; he turns against traditions that obscure the primary meaning of the law and the Word of God – which centres around love for God and all people. The desire for God that all people live together in peace and love.

Whatever traditions we have inherited from our forefathers, whatever habits we hold dear, all this has to be seen in the light of the central meaning of Scripture. Sticking to whatever we deem important cannot be at the expense of applying the word of God in its basic meaning – and this basic meaning is summarized by Jesus in the words we use at the beginning of our service: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

These Jewish leaders worried more about some of those traditions that set them apart from people, and less about the real meaning of the law. They worried more about their intricate moral system – beautiful as that may have been for them – than on actual life, and love, and people.

And this is the ultimate criterion for all we do, even for our own beautiful religious traditions. They must not contradict the word of God and its intentions. Do they bring Christians together? Do they help us to live the life God intends for us and for others? If our habits push other Christians away from us, we make a grave mistake in sticking to those traditions. Does your lifestyle attract people?

Does this mean we have to adapt our traditions and habits whenever someone comes to us and says he does not like them? Well no ofcourse – because then that

person probably makes his own habits and traditions the criterion. The issue is that Jesus wants to shift the focus from any tradition or law or habit, to the heart of the matter.

### **Conclusion**

We must make sure that what is good and beautiful does not come in the way of what is best – that is living this life in love, in accordance with the will of God as laid down in his Word. We do not live to carve traditions into stone, we do not live for our church's habits,

even if they are really beautiful. We do not live for our history. Not even for our future.

We live for God and for His people; we are called to gather, not to create walls. To go out to people, not to hold them off. To enter into the homes and lives of people, to eat with them, and to be like Christ for them. God wants us to reconcile, not to divide. He wants us to love and to be a blessing. That is what our life should be about and nothing – not even our loftiest principles and habits and traditions - should ever get priority over loving God and other people – as he asks of us in his Word.

*Amen*