

Jesus declared all food clean

Matthew 15.10-28

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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. But 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 outside in the garden. On the shed in the back of the garden actually. My parents never noticed, but later i confessed.

Jesus spoke in our Gospel story about food, but the issue of taste was not the question. 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 Matthew, to underline that Jesus declared all food to be okay for eating? Because at the time when Matthew 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. And this created major divisions in the church. Racial divisions should be totally rejected, both in society and even more in church - the church that is the united people of God.



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.

Matthew 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.

Remember in Acts 10, where Peter gets a vision from God of a tablecloth filled with unclean food. God tells 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 its does not matter what you eat, why make an issue of it.

By this this vision Peter was prepared 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. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians how he had a conflict with Peter over food. Because Peter withdrew from eating with gentile Christians when he was criticized by some Jewish followers of Jesus.

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. And even worse, if you would say: I will not eat your English food. Or your Dutch food. Or your Nigerian, or Arab food. The food of your people is bad... This is definitely not good for relationships.



And I find it very interesting that Matthew describes that after the discussions Jesus had with the Pharisees and the crowds about eating unclean food, Jesus went to the pagan areas around Tyre and Sidon - Lebanon now. And Jesus then entered into a conversation with a Canaanite woman whose daughter he heals.

To our ears this sound like just a fact, nothing special. But for Jewish readers at that time, this was highly critical. They would never play a healing role in relations with “others”.

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, or whatever cultural habits you have, to separate you from others. And never use your religious opinion as an excuse to not touch the lives of 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 that the Pharisees disagreed with Jesus. They were a fundamentalist sect, deeply motivated to obey God and serve him through following the law in all of its fine details. And more than the Biblical law, they added their own traditions to that as well, just to be on the safe side.

In Matthew's Gospel, in the part before what we have read, you can see why Jesus spoke of this issue of defilement and food. The Pharisees saw some disciples of Jesus came from a public meeting, and they then took their food without washing their hands first. Forbidden!

According their traditions, the washing of hands had to be done. "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." (Mat 15.2)

This washing of hands was a big deal for them, as it was part of their religious traditions. The main theologians of Israel, Hillel and Shamma, disagreed about many things, but they did agree that the washing of hands before eating was of the highest importance.

Most traditions of the Jews were about matters of purification, especially about the cleansing of kitchen utensils.

Mark explains for his gentile readers that those Jews washed so many things ritually. Mark 7.4: "...and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash [their hands]. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches."

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, Jesus and his disciples had just been with the people, and many touched Jesus and he healed them. The masses touched him... Those were normal people; of course the crowds were not ritually clean. They did not follow all those laws of God!

Imagine. Impure sinful people touching Jesus and the disciples for being healed. But Jesus did not ask them first whether they were ritually clean. And after such experiences with the crowds, some of the disciples ate without purifying themselves.

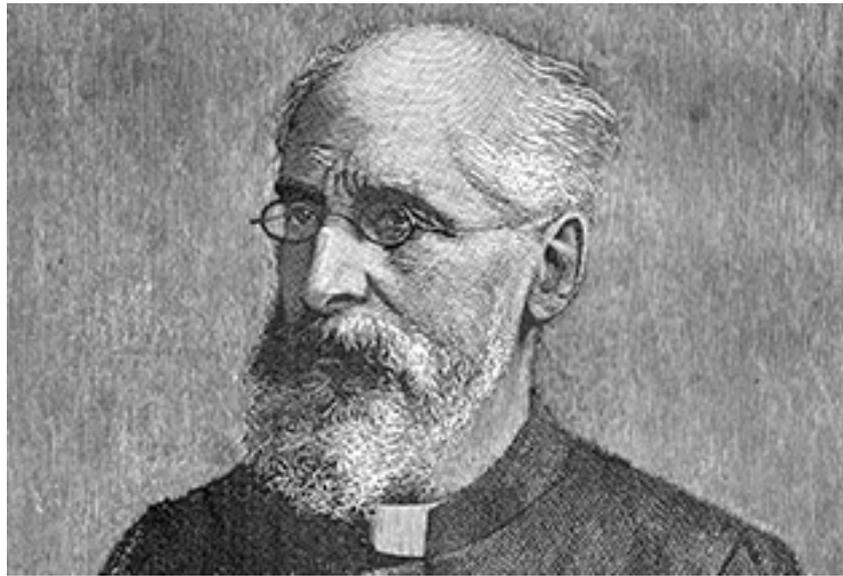
Bread eaten with unwashed hands was considered like excrement by the major rabbis. Hands had to be washed to the wrist to be considered clean, otherwise you had big problems with God.

But Jesus made clear that for God, washing your hands or not, is trivial. Wash them, or do not wash them. For God it does not matter. Food is not unclean, and even if it is dirty, that dirt leaves the body in the toilet.

This washing of hands was a trivial matter in the eyes of Jesus. Not for my English aunty Jean by the way - I remember as a boy when I visited her family in Ruislip, she would always before dinner, tell me and my cousins, "Wash your hands and comb your hair for table!" :)

Jesus made clear that we can never let issues of food, drinks, or whatever cultural habits, create separation between people - and with this he directly contradicted the Judaism of his days.

Alfred Edersheim, a Jewish convert to Christianity and a Biblical scholar, and also an Anglican priest, speaks of the “infinite distance between Christ and the teaching of the synagogue”. [*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. Yes! You hear that right. God had to be ritually cleansed.

Did God not go to Egypt to save Israel? So God came in contact with paganism and God needed purification. Likewise, after God buried Moses, as he touched a corpse God immersed himself in a bath of fire, the Jews believed.

A man who ate with unclean hands was, according to these Jewish ideas, 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. It was bad theology, and it separated people.

3. It is about the heart

Jesus and those Pharisees spoke completely 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 behavior and our heart, our mind, those are the things that make us unclean toward God.

Traditions in themselves can be 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 centers around love for God and for all people. God wants all people to live together in peace and love - irrespective of where we were born, and irrespective of the color of our skin.

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 worship service every week: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and you shall love your neighbor 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 actually used those traditions purposely to stay separated from the other nations.

But Jesus Christ came to make us one new people of God. So your habits, your cultures, your traditions, you can never use them as ammunition against people. Do we with our behavior gather Christians together? Does our life draw people into the family of God?

If our habits push other people away from us, we make a grave mistake in sticking to those habits. Does your life-style attract people or push them away?

Conclusion

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. God wants us to enter into the homes and the 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 habits and traditions - should ever get priority over loving God and other people.

Jesus went to the Canaanite woman; Peter went into the home of the Roman soldier Cornelius. Whose house will you enter this week? Or who will you invite into your home? Jesus and Peter did not stick to the small social environment of people who were just like them - they went and met with the strangest, most different people.

And that is where our Lord is sending us. To be with the people; with all the people. So be careful that you do not allow your own habits, or that you not allow their strange habits - to separate you from them.

And certainly in our church community, we will not allow our cultural differences to separate us. Because, as we read in Psalm 133, it is lovely if brothers and sisters live together in unity - that is where the Lord commands his blessing.

+ Amen