

## Jason Upchurch - Mark 7:14-19 - The Good News that All Foods Are Clean

If you remember, when we first started the gospel of Mark I spent a fair amount of time discussing the very first verse of the gospel: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And part of what we saw there was simply that the whole gospel of Mark is good news. The whole life and death and resurrection of Jesus is good news. It's not just penal substitutionary atonement - that Jesus died on the cross in my place for my sin. Although that is good news and we could say that's really the very heart of the gospel, it's not all the good news. **Everything** that Jesus did and said that is recorded for us in the gospels is good news for us.

I say that because this morning we're coming to a mammoth theological shift in salvation history. What we're looking at here is Jesus single-handedly recategorizing clean and unclean food laws that have been in place since before Noah's flood and very likely as early as Cain and Abel in Genesis 4.

And as Gentiles who are 2,000 years removed from the inauguration of the New Covenant, it's hard for us to understand just how amazingly good this news is that Jesus has declared all foods clean.

Now, before we get to that in **Vs. 19**, why is this even a thing? Why is Jesus talking about all clean and unclean foods? Well, if you notice in **Vs. 14** Jesus is continuing the conversation from his rebuke of the Pharisees.

### **Read 14**

Remember last week the Pharisees were called out as religious hypocrites - religious actors (that's what the word hypocrite means in Greek) - because they invented their own religious system of laws. They had all these washing rituals that they told people to do and none of which were in the Law of Moses. None of them were biblical And yet they pawned them off as though this was the way to holiness according to God.

They were misrepresenting God. And they did so on 2 fronts. First, they added to his Word, adding all these washings and laws that God did not command. But they also took away from the Word of God by not doing what God explicitly commanded in Scripture like taking care of elderly parents financially.

So Jesus then pivots to talking about food laws. Why? What's the connection between food laws and washing?

Actually they're connected rather tightly. See, the real issue here is religious defilement. What makes a person unclean? What defiles them in the sight of God? What makes them unauthorized to be in the camp of Israel?

The reason washings were important to the Pharisees was because they assumed people became unclean throughout the day and if they didn't cleanse themselves through ritual washing then they would defile themselves internally in the sight of God.

You touch someone or something unclean, then you touch your food so your food becomes unclean. Then you eat your food and you are now internally unclean and defiled before God.

Remember this is not about sanitation, it's not about using soap and water washing for 30 seconds so you don't eat bacteria. The issue here is If they didn't cleanse themselves from defilement then they would become sinners.

That's why there's all the hoopla about washings. They think people are going to defile themselves before God.

And so Jesus totally takes a wrecking ball to that whole idea. If God was concerned about his people defiling themselves by touching things and needing to wash before they ate he would have mentioned it somewhere in the Law. But he didn't.

But what God did do was make a distinction between clean and unclean things.

And in this section Jesus does something absolutely radical: he declares all food clean. He abolishes the distinction between clean and unclean for his followers.

Think about that for a minute. Who made the distinction in the OT between clean and unclean animals? God did. And so who does Jesus think he is that he can come in here and suddenly declare all food clean? Yeah, only God can do that. He's the one who can decide what we do or do not put in our bodies. He's the one who can decide what can or cannot defile us.

Now, I want to break this section up into two parts because I think it's that amazing.

We're going to do a little theology of food laws this morning. And then next week we'll look at the significance of the heart. My goal in doing this is to understand the significance of the good news of Jesus declaring all foods clean.

And next week we're going to see that what offends God is not things we put into our bodies, but sin that comes out of our heart. These 2 pillars are basically what drives this whole section.

Jesus's concern is with the heart, what's on the inside of a person. The Pharisees are concerned with the body, what's on the outside.

Jesus is concerned with moral purity, the Pharisees are concerned with ritual purity. And not even God's idea of ritual purity, but their own idea.

So that's our context, the background. The big picture today is that clean and unclean foods prepare the way for the gospel.

Now, it's going to take me a little bit to defend that statement. So I want to do a little history of food laws this morning. I know for most of you that is just riveting, and amazing. For others you'll want to grab a cup of coffee and stand in the back doing some calf raises to stay awake. That's fine.

For me this is pretty fascinating mostly because we don't even think about what we put into our mouths as it relates to God.

Maybe you're counting calories or avoiding gluten or allergic to Red 40 or lactose intolerant. So you might think about food more than most. But even then we don't often think of the spiritual implications of food in our lives.

And part of the reason for that is that Jesus has brought us into the New Covenant through his sacrificial death and resurrection. We are no longer under the Old Covenant of Moses - that included dietary laws - but we're now under the new law of Christ where all is clean.

But I want us to see just how pervasive the OC law was.

Our outline this morning is this: History of the dietary laws. The abolition of dietary laws.

### 1) The History of dietary laws.

**Turn to Genesis 4.** This is the 2 sons of Adam and Eve: Cain and Abel. Cain kills Abel.

Now in some sense we could actually begin this study in **Gen 2** and **3** because what God set up in the Garden was a dietary law. Everything was clean - authorized - except for the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. That tree did not literally kill Adam and Eve, at least not because it was poisonous. It was simply off limits by God. He had made a distinction for Adam and Eve and they failed.

But here we see that the 2 brothers are set to bring an offering to God and notice the difference. **Read 1-7**

Now, to be fair, we don't know if Cain's offering was rejected because he should have brought an animal sacrifice or because he didn't bring the best of his offering. We do know his heart was wicked and that's the biggest issue.

But what we also know from here is that the offering itself was not accepted. Either it needed to be the best of his food or it needed to be an animal sacrifice - somehow God limited what was acceptable for people to bring to him. And God even gives him an opportunity to repent. But he doesn't.

His wicked heart is expressed through his refusal to bring the clean, right, authorized offering to God. And when God himself rebukes him he doesn't change. So authorized or unauthorized food - clean and unclean - starts very early in the Bible.

**Turn to Gen. 7.** Here we see the distinction even more clearly as God is telling Noah to build the ark and get into the ark before he destroys the world in a flood. **Read 1-10**

Interesting. Prior to this there is no place where God delineates the difference between clean and unclean. At least none that is recorded. Our best guess is that at some point God made it clear to humanity that there were some types of animals that were clean - and those could be eaten and sacrificed. And types of animals that are unclean - animals that could not be eaten or sacrificed.

The ark was not filled simply with one pair of all animals. It was filled with 1 pair of unclean animals and 7 pair of clean animals. Then look at **8:20-22. Read**

So part of the purpose of the clean animals wasn't just what could be eaten, it was also what could be sacrificed to God. Noah did not sacrifice unclean animals, he sacrificed clean ones.

So even when God drowned the whole world in a flood, he still had very specific concern for which animals were clean and unclean for eating and for sacrifice.

**Turn to Lev. 11.** Most everyone who starts a Bible reading plan gets stuck right about here, so we might as well own that and read some of this to get a feel. **Read 1-23, 46-47**

That's a lot, isn't it? Even these specific animals are just examples of what can and cannot be eaten, it's not exhaustive.

Now again, the question is "why?" Why these animals and not others? We're really not told. Some people think you couldn't eat pork because of trichinosis - a disease that comes from undercooking pork. But there was no cooking revolution that happened in the NC that allowed for pork to be eaten.

Another observation here is that to some extent the animals that are unclean are often predators. They kill for their food. All the winged animals eat meat, many of the fish and sea animals that are excluded are predators. This is isn't universal, the hare isn't a predator and many of the winged insects aren't either. So although there are some common features, I don't think we can come up with a universal rule based on that.

So why? We're not told explicitly. God had simply authorized some animals for eating and sacrificing and other he forbade from eating and sacrificing.

Now, I think what we're going to see in the NT is that God used clean and unclean foods as a schoolmaster - like **Gal 4** says - to make an easy an obvious distinction between the people of Israel and the Gentiles. And when Christ came, the declaring of foods clean meant gentiles could be part of the people of God through faith in Jesus.

How did it teach Israel that distinction? How did food laws separate Israel from Gentiles?

Well, if you came to someone's house and they were raising pigs and were roasting owl and pork ribs on the BBQ then you knew they were not part of the covenant community of Israel. It was a simple and obvious distinction between Israel and the Gentiles. It was a simple and obvious distinction.

But then we see passages where cleanness becomes a metaphor for purity before God. Not just by what we eat, but our whole person. There's a transition. It's not just food - clean and unclean - but my whole being, soul and spirit.

**Psalms 24:3-4:** Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has *clean* hands and pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false, and does not swear deceitfully.

How do you come into God's presence? By being clean. Pure and holy in the sight of God. Cleanness is a metaphor for salvation and the righteousness of God.

**Psalms 51:10:** Create in me a clean heart, O God. And renew a right spirit within me.

Again, clean-language - purity language - related to the actual person. In their heart.

If you were clean, if you followed the food laws, if you were circumcised, if you followed the Sabbath regulations: you were obviously part of the covenant people of God, Israel. If you didn't follow those things, you were an outsider, a Gentile.

Let's fast forward to **Acts 10**. Turn there. This is the second point of the sermon: food laws are abolished.

Here in Acts Jesus has died and risen and reigns in heaven. The church is growing, the gospel is spreading but mostly it's spreading in Israel. In Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria amongst Jewish people or mostly Jewish people.

Here in **Acts 10** we have a huge shift in salvation history where the very first fully Gentile convert comes to faith in Jesus. Notice how this whole thing goes down.

Remember Cornelius is a Gentile centurion. He lives on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea in Caesarea Maritima. He's a Roman mid-officer in charge of 100 troops and he gets a vision of an angel telling him to send to Joppa to call for a guy named Peter. So he sends the guys down the beach to get Peter. And right before the guys show up at the place Peter is staying, Peter also gets a vision. **Read 9-18**

Now, that's the craziest vision ever. It happens 3 times. And most of you know the rest of the story. The delegation from Cornelius arrives right after that and Peter goes and preaches the gospel to Cornelius and his household and everyone is saved. Well, that's kind of controversial because Cornelius is a gentile. Unclean.

But we know he's saved because the passage tells us he's saved, the Holy Spirit fell upon him and his whole household started speaking in tongues just like they did in the beginning of the book of Acts. This was a special sign that the Holy Spirit used to ensure Peter knew that these guys were for sure saved.

But what did Jesus just tell Peter about the animals? Do not call unclean what I've called clean. There's no distinction. What in the world does that have to do with the gospel? Everything. When Peter reports that he hung out with unclean gentiles to the church in Jerusalem there's an uproar. **Look at 11:1-18**

The penny drops. The vision of the animals was more than just about the animals, wasn't it? It was about the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Kingdom of God through faith in Jesus.

See, that's why I think the food laws were primarily a barrier between the Jews and Gentiles. It separated the Jews from the Gentiles. And the way in which Peter and all the early disciples were told that the Gentiles were included in the New Covenant was through the food laws being abolished.

Now, at this point you'd think the issue was settled. But it's not. Not even close. And this food issue turns out to be a gospel issue. **Look at Galatians 2:11-13. Read**

What is going on? What's going on is that in Antioch, just north of Israel the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians are living out their liberty. They're having pork chops and eagle at their potlucks. Everything is great. Peter comes up to visit the church and he's eating pork and whatever he wants with Jews and Gentiles and everything is fine.

The issue here is eating - and specifically what they're eating.

But then there's a group of guys who come to Antioch from the Jerusalem church where James is the pastor. These are heavy-duty Jewish guys. They still hold to the Law. They don't have to, but in their own liberty they can. But what happens is that Peter hears they're coming and he gets afraid and he no longer eats with the Gentiles anymore. He withdraws from them and returns to eating kosher with only Jewish Christians.

He's fearing judgment from these Jewish guys from James. And all the Jewish Christians start doing the same thing. They all abandon their Gentile brothers in the faith and hunker down on the other side of the potluck - even the apostle Barnabas gets caught up in this nonsense.

Why is this bad? Because they're functionally saying that the Gentiles are unclean. The Gentiles are eating forbidden food and the Jews are separating and in so doing they are abandoning the gospel.

This is a little tongue-in-cheek but hear me out: refusing to eat bacon, or refusing to allow people to eat bacon will send you to hell. It is adding works to the gospel. **Read 11**

He stood what? Condemned. **Read 13-14**

This is hypocrisy. This is not in step with the gospel. The apostle Paul is calling out the apostle Peter and Barnabas in front of everyone. Peter - the guy who got the vision like 15 years earlier and went to Cornelius. That same guy!

Now, this section is a little confusing. Let me walk you through it. **Vs. 13:** "If you though a Jew live like a Gentile and not like a Jew." Stop there. What does that mean? It means that he's a Jewish Christian but lives like a Gentile in terms of eating whatever he wants. He had abandoned the kosher diet and he's eating/living like a Gentile. That's fine. In Christ we have that freedom.

"If you though a Jew live like a Gentile - eating whatever - and not like Jew, how can you force Gentiles to live like Jews?"

"Peter, you're not eating kosher, but now if the Gentiles want to eat with you they have to eat kosher? What's up with that?"

He and Barnabas and the whole church had abandoned the gospel at the potluck over bacon. **Read 15-16**

There it is. Adding food laws is adding works to the law. Either you are justified by faith in Christ alone and no longer under the Law. Or you are trying to achieve salvation by Jesus plus works.

See, the food laws in the OT were never about sinfulness. There's nothing intrinsically sinful about eating rock badger. They were about separation from Gentiles. But now that Jesus has come and calls Gentiles to faith, the food laws that restricted Gentiles are gone too.

In a lot of ways this issue is very similar to circumcision. But it's a more obvious issue because you can tell what people are eating.

Now, with all that, let's go back to **Mark** and put the pieces together. I want to just make a few simple observations.

1) What defiles us before God is what's inside, not what's outside. **Read 14-15**

Our hearts are the real issue before God, not stuff we touch. We don't need to be religious OCD people thinking that touching certain things makes us impure before God because that's not where sin originates. Sin - true defilement - is a heart issue.

2) Religious hypocrites are left in the dark again about important Kingdom issues. **Read 17-18**

Remember we saw a few chapters ago how parables often sifted the outsiders from the insiders? That's what's happening here too. Jesus gives a "parable" - not a story per se, but a pithy saying that alludes to a bigger issue. But it's only later when he's alone with the disciples that he explains it.

He gives the outsiders just enough to hear but not understand. Here, the disciples understand but only because Jesus reveals it to them.

Side: Most of you are missing Vs. 16, there's good reason to believe it was an additional to later copies of the Bible and not in the original version of Mark which is why it's missing in many of your Bible.

3) Jesus hides something even from his disciples. **Read 18-19**

Let me ask you this: if Jesus declared all foods clean here, why did Peter need the vision in Acts 10? And the clarification in Galatians 2?

Because I think this statement - in parentheses in ESV and NIV - is Mark helping us understand. Jesus didn't directly that all foods are clean. He directly implied it. And when Mark writes his gospel with Peter 20-30 years after Jesus, the situation with Cornelius and Galatia had already happened. And I think what Mark wants us to know is that Jesus himself even alluded to making all foods clean in his ministry. It was subtle - which is why Mark adds this little tidbit in for us - but it was there.

And then Mark demonstrates that food being clean means Gentiles are in the Kingdom by spending the next couple of chapters talking about Jesus's ministry to Jews? Or Gentiles? Gentiles. Food is clean and the Gentiles are in.

I think it's appropriate we're having a potluck today. I think most of us are probably Gentiles. We don't even think about the food we're going to eat. That's because God in his grace has ushered us in to his covenant people through faith in his amazing Son.

**Pray**