

Food matters

Mark 7.1-8, 14-24

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I used to have auntie Jean in England. She had married my mother's brother, Jan, after they had met in Singapore in the late 1940s.

I often stayed with my uncle Jan and auntie Jean and their sons Malcolm and Robert, when I was a teenager. Before dinner auntie Jean would always shout through their bungalow in Ruislip Manor: "Wash you hands and comb your hair for table!"

With my rather wild cousins Malcolm and Robert, I would not have the guts not to wash my hands and comb my hair before eating together.

I was reminded of this because of the Gospel story today. It is about food and food always has my keen interest, and it is about washings hands.

The question in the story, whether it matters for God what we eat, or whether we wash our hands before eating.

Now it would be easy to read the story, and to conclude: no, for God this does not matter.

Allow me to argue the opposite. Food matters a lot.



1. Criticism by Pharisees

It begins when some Pharisees see that some of the disciples of Jesus did not wash their hands before eating.

For the Pharisees this was a religious matter. The Elders had taught that hands must be washed before eating, to not by accident defile your body with things that are unclean.

These Elders were two of the great theologians in Israel, Hillel and Shammai. Jesus may have actually seen both of them during his lifetime.

If those two theologians agreed about the religious need to wash hands, then it was almost as if God himself had spoken.

Alfred Edersheim, a Messianic Jew, wrote a book about the life and time of Jesus. He mentions how many Jews believed that even 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, God immersed himself in a bath of fire.”

A man who ate with unclean hands was, according to these Jewish ideas, subject to the attacks of a demon. That demon, called Shibta, would cause poverty and destruction.



Jesus could not just be indifferent to this sort of traditionalism and strongly rejected it.

Mark explains to his readers that these Pharisees always wash their hands, and he mentions that they did this especially when they came from the marketplace.

That is logical, because the market is where you touch people and products that might be impure - you never know. So they fanatically washed their hands - as if there was a continuous pandemic.

Just as over a year ago, we were told again and again to not touch any surface that might have been touched by someone who might be contaminated by Covid-19. You probably had your bottle with stuff ready to spray your hands.

And do you remember the advice, if you came from a shop, how you should take special measures to ensure that the contamination that you might have taken from the shop, would not end up in your kitchen?

It drove many people crazy. But this was the lifestyle of those Pharisees. A total focus on the impurity that might be transmitted from other people. Awful, to have such a focus on how other people might make you impure for God.

I think in the past year we have all noticed how offensive it can feel, to be treated as if you are a possible source of contamination for other people. To be treated as if you are impure.

For the Pharisees, all people were a potential risk. So they always kept their distance. As if all other people were contagious cockroaches.

What a humiliating way of looking at other people. “Others” as a potential source of evil.

How do you look at others who eat food that you think they should not eat?

2. Jesus attacks this worldview

Jesus rejects this way of looking at others, and he said a few very radical things - radical in the context of Israel in those days.

Jesus told the Pharisees that they were hypocrites, and that their hearts were far away from God. This was clear, Jesus said, because they were “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

So for Jesus, the overdose of rules and regulations that the Pharisees were teaching, had to be done away with, because with their overdose of man-made regulations, they trespassed against the actual commandment of God.

Jesus does not elaborate, or maybe he did and the Gospel writers do not give us the details. But in case there is any doubt, a few chapters later in the Gospel of Mark, we read what for Jesus was the main commandment.

One of the theologians of Israel asked Jesus: “Which commandment is the first of all?” You know the answer that Jesus gave: ‘The first is, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength. The second is, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.’

In their eagerness to please God, the Pharisees had lost track of God himself and of their fellow humans. They had forgotten that love for God and for other people is the heart of what God asks from us.

So following Jesus Christ can never be a matter of ticking the boxes of do’s and don’ts. It is about our heart for God and for others.

To his disciples Jesus said:

There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.

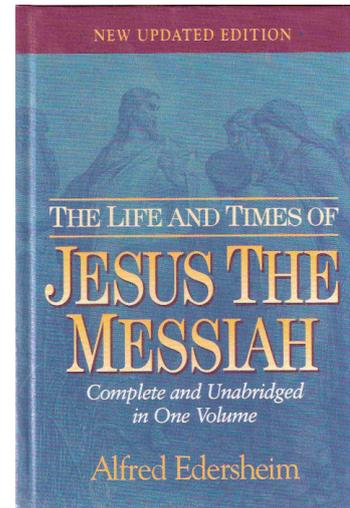
What? Our Lord Jesus, are you now directly contradicting certain laws of the Old Testament? The laws of Moses were very clear that certain types of food were taboo and would make you ritually impure. The Old Testament contains many such laws.

What really makes a person unclean, are matters of the heart. And if you think of all those sins that Jesus mentioned, they are really wrongs against other people.

Those are the things that matter for God, not what ends up in your stomach.

By the way, this makes very clear that Jesus does not put the laws of God aside. He does not suggest that lifestyle does not matter. Our behaviour does matter for God.

But Jesus speaks out specifically against the laws of purity. And that was a new thing, and very radical. Mark realised the importance of the moment, and said: “Thus Jesus declared all foods clean.”



Jesus basically said: this may have been part of the law book of the Old Testament, but something now changes. Those laws no longer apply as the law to love your fellow man takes precedence.

3. The matter was urgent

This matter was urgent when Mark wrote his Gospel. There was much tension in churches between the believers from Jewish and those from non-Jewish backgrounds - exactly about what food to eat.

Do we nowadays make such a fuss over the food we eat, or should not eat? In our times, food is also often hotly debated, and it does divide people, does it not? I have seen how it can create problems in churches.

Well, what is new. 2000 years ago, the Christian Jews, in their culture, had strict rules for their food, but the gentile Christians ate everything that God had forbidden in the Jewish laws.

This created separation in the churches. The unity of the people of God was at stake.

But Jesus had made clear: Food is not what makes us impure. You must not let what you, or what the other eats, separate you from others in the church.

This means, Jewish Christians could without any problem enter into the homes of non-Jewish Christians, and enjoy meals together. Eating together, especially the Eucharistic meal, was the heart of the Christian fellowship. The place where the community and the unity of the church was born and strengthened.

It is very interesting that Mark describes that after the discussions about food, Jesus went to the gentile area of Tyre and Sidon, in modern-day Lebanon, where he entered into a house and where he was in touch with gentiles.

For the Jews in the time of Jesus this was shocking.

For Jesus, the purity laws of the Old Testament were not a valid reason for keeping his distance from people from other cultures.

Because for him, to have community with other people - showing love to people - is far more important than what we eat or drink.

Does this make it unimportant what we eat or drink?

We once had a Coptic bishop eating with us, in Egypt. We had a very nice time, he seemed to enjoy the food... and afterwards I realised... Ahhh - it is the time of Coptic fasting! The bishop should have been eating vegan food. And the Copts, especially their bishops, are strict in these matters.



I apologised to him, but he laughed. He said: 'It is more important to have good fellowship than what we eat.' And that in a way, summarised what Jesus was talking about.

It is important what we eat. I think we should be prepared, for the sake of fellowship, to eat what someone else puts in front of us. So we eat meat. Or vegetarian. Dependent on what our host gives us.

If I eat with a vegetarian, I must learn not to nag. I admit, it is a process... And in my opinion, if a vegetarian eats with me, he should not insult me by refusing my meat. Is this not the consequence of what Jesus says about community?

Our goal is to love God and our fellow man. That is the first law of the Christian life. So we must take great care that we do not allow trivialities to come between us.

But in our times, we are also very aware that the food we eat, is not only something personal. Our consumption does exhaust nature and much of it is actually at the expense of the food needed by others.

What we eat might directly impact our poor brothers and sisters on the other side of the world.

If love for God and love for man is our priority, what we eat does actually become important, not just on the micro-level, when you eat with friends.

But we must also consider the impact of what we and eat, on our whole ecosystem - as an expression of love for God, the Creator, and love for our fellow man.

But here it become complicated. We must by all means do this without letting food create distance from one another if we sit at the same table. This is complicated. Food has become quite a contentious issue nowadays.

So living for God and loving people does impact what food we eat. Not for its ritual purity. But for the way in which our food does exhaust the earth and for how it impacts poor people in other parts of the world.

We are called to bless people, not to hurt them.

We must be very conscious of our consumption patterns in general, including our food. For the sake of the world. But at the same time, we must take care to not let this matter divide us from those near to us.

This is not easy. We have many strong opinion into all directions. But as I said before, the Christian life is not one of ticking of boxes of do's and don'ts. If only it were that easy.

We have the love for God and love for others as our lode star. That should help us manoeuvre through life, all the time deciding: how does my action - of eating or any other thing - show my love for God and for all people.

Amen