



Jewish Food Laws and Gentiles.

A recent article we published: “Thus Jesus declared all food clean – or did He,” solicited quite a number of comments and queries so we’ve decided some further exposition might help. The original piece was written by a member of the Emmaus Group with Jewish heritage and sincere passion for God.

There are two passages of scripture in the book of Acts that inform opinion about foods permissible for Gentiles, namely Acts 10 and 15: passages that speak of Peter’s vision in Joppa and the Council of Jerusalem. However, before we expound further we want to be abundantly clear about what we are *not* saying.

We are *not* saying that a Gentile who does not follow God’s counsel in Leviticus 11 risks their salvation. Salvation comes by faith and faith alone, *not* by obeying laws or doing works – that would be heretical teaching! Nor are we saying that one is made righteous through obeying the Torah (teaching) of God, again we are made righteous by faith in the Messiah.

To understand scripture properly we must understand the context of what was written. Verses taken out of context can easily be misconstrued and made to say things they don’t. In Acts 10, Peter is staying with Simon the tanner by the sea in Jaffa, when he has a vision that perplexes him. He’s on the roof of Simon’s house and falls into a trance, in which he sees a strange vision; something like a sheet being lowered out of heaven, which contained all manner of animals, reptiles and birds - creatures deemed *unclean* according to God’s word in Leviticus 11. Peter then hears a voice telling him to kill and eat - he protests and argues with the Lord, who tells Peter not to say what He says is clean, is unclean. Read Acts 10:9-35.

Now significantly, this sheet is lowered *three* times in the vision. As Peter sat on the roof afterwards, perplexed and contemplating what he’d seen, *three* Gentile men (deemed *unclean* by the Jews) knocked on Simon’s door asking for Peter. The Holy Spirit tells Peter to go down and speak to them. Peter learns from them that he has been asked to go the house of a Roman leader, Cornelius, a God-fearing man who is well respected by the Jews. So Simon and Peter invite the men in for the night and show them hospitality – something that, ordinarily, would be very unlikely to happen!

Peter realised the Lord had used this perplexing vision (that appeared at face value to contradict God’s commands in Leviticus 11) to actually teach him something important for his ministry: that the Gentiles were not to be seen as unclean anymore. One must appreciate that in those days, Jews and Gentiles, broadly speaking, did not associate because the Jews believed the Gentiles were *unclean*. The sheet being lowered three times alluded to the three men making it difficult for Peter to misread what God was saying. On his journey to Cornelius’ house he had more time to reflect and understood fully what the Lord was saying; that this vision was nothing to do with a sudden change in the food laws, for God is the God who does not change. It was to grab Peter’s attention and prepare him for what he was about to do next: follow three Gentiles to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile leader.

He duly follows the men and on arriving, Cornelius bows down and pays homage to Peter who tells him to “get up” as he is just a man, demonstrating further what he has learnt from the vision; that all men are equal in the sight of God. He reinforces his new understanding by saying to the men who’d gathered at Cornelius’ house; *“you believe that it is contrary to law and justice for a Jewish person to associate with or to approach a foreigner: but God explained to me (by way of the vision!) not to say in any way that a man is common or unclean: for this reason then I came without raising objection when I was sent for.”*

In verse 34 Peter explains more; *“in truth I understand that God does not show partiality, but in every nation, the one who reveres Him and works righteousness is acceptable to Him.”* Peter clearly now understands the concept of the one new man in Christ.

Now later in Acts 15, when the so called “Council of Jerusalem” gathered, we learn that the Apostles had been on the road preaching and converting Gentiles and had come up against a problem: namely, that the new Gentile converts turning to God were being overburdened by Jewish law. It’s very important to note that the English word law is *not* an accurate translation of the original Greek and Hebrew words used, which allude to the Torah, the teachings of Moses. The Jewish Apostles themselves had struggled with all the law and realised that for these new Gentile converts, it was just too much! They met, discussed the matter and prayed about it.

Significantly in chapter 15:19-20, Peter stands up and states to the council that; *“on account of this I judge that we should not cause difficulty for those of the Gentiles that are turning to God, but to instruct them to abstain from the pollutions of the idols, immorality, and from meat of strangled animals and from the blood.”* Now note he says those who are *turning* to God. Their concern was about putting too great a yoke of burden on the Gentiles because they were new converts, in the early stages of turning to God. The Apostles recognised that by attending the synagogue each Shabbat these new converts would gradually hear “Moses preached” (v21: i.e. the teachings/Torah) weekly and by time would hear the full word of God and could address the matter of food regulations when they were strong enough in their faith and ready to follow God’s word and - had the desire to do so out of love for Him.

Many of us are familiar with the Alpha course. Imagine trying to get new converts on an Alpha course to follow all the advice and laws of God. It would be too much for spiritual babies. Alpha teaches the basics, helps people find God, and then by time as they attend church each week they hear the rest of God’s word. That is exactly what was happening in the early days of the Apostles ministry. God’s word about what to eat was not being undone for the Gentiles, the Apostle simply agreed to feed them with bite-sized chunks of understanding. This principle is echoed in Paul’s admonishment to the Corinthians when he says, “I had to feed you with milk because you were not ready for anything stronger, and you still aren’t ready!” (1 Cor 3:2)

So in agreement with the Holy Spirit, the Apostles sent Judas and Silas out on mission with a message to new converts, to abstain from meat offered to idols, and from blood and strangled animals and immorality (v28). It was a compassionate, common-sense approach, to help new believers who were turning to God and not overburden them just as we do today in many aspects of church life.

If Jew and Gentile are one in Christ Jesus, and if Gentiles are partakers of the same covenant, grafted into spiritual Israel by a God who shows no partiality, then surely God’s counsel with regards to food applies to us too? Or are we seeking to have our cake and eat it?

In the New Covenant, God writes His law on our minds and in our hearts - it is written in our hearts, so that we may obey out of love. Jesus said "If you love me, obey me". We want all the blessings of Christ - but do we love Him enough to want to please Him in all our ways? Galatians also makes clear we are saved by faith and not by following the law. The "righteous shall live by faith" says Paul. But Paul never said the law didn't apply - the same law (Torah teaching) that Jesus came to fulfil (i.e. explain more fully) and *not* to replace.

"Therefore is the law (Torah teaching) contrary to the promises of God? God forbid!
Galatians 3:21

It's our view that if we love God with all our heart, soul and mind; and if we sincerely acknowledge His ways and thoughts are higher than ours, then we need to respect His advice, given for a reason, and ask ourselves what He'd like us to do about this matter?

In conclusion we'd like to clarify that we don't believe following God's regulations on food makes one more holy or righteous than another, not does it assure one's salvation more than another. But we do wonder what blessings may come for those who choose, out of freewill and love for the Father - to obey?

Please read the scriptures, pray and spend time meditating on this subject and ask the Spirit of Truth, who earnestly desires to lead you into all understanding, to reveal to you personally what's the truth about this subject.

In Christ,

The Emmaus Group.