

Holiness and Food

Deuteronomy 14

Today's text is Deuteronomy 14 which gives a summary of the dietary laws of the old covenant, describing what they could and couldn't eat. You might have seen the title of today's message, "Holiness and Food," and thought, "Wow, now ***that's*** a riveting topic. . ." I guess we'll know in about half an hour!

When you think about it, the Bible speaks about food all the way "from Genesis to the maps":

- We find the first dietary restriction in Genesis 2. God told Adam and Eve that they could eat from any tree of the garden except from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." From our point of view, that doesn't seem unreasonable. But Adam and Eve believed the serpent who suggested that the reason God gave that command was because He was holding out on them, that He really didn't have their best in mind. And so the first sin involve eating something they shouldn't have.
- The last book of the Bible speaks of the "marriage feast of the Lamb" in Revelation 19:6.
- In between Genesis and Revelation the Bible mentions food in almost every conceivable context. Esau sold his birthright for a meal because he was hungry. Jesus told parables about banquets and feasts. Jesus ate fish after His resurrection. Jewish Christians had to learn that it was okay to eat with Gentiles.

Since food is such a fundamental need of every person on the planet, it's not surprising that the Scriptures mention food so often. Deuteronomy is no exception. Loving the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and might would certainly include their food and drink. Today we are going to see from Deuteronomy 14 how Jews living under the old covenant were to express their holiness through the food they ate. Then we'll consider the transition to the new covenant and what it looks like to glorify God in our day.

Old Covenant Dietary Laws (Deuteronomy 14:1–21)

In verse 1 Moses tells the people to avoid the grief/death rituals of the Canaanite people.

1 "You are the sons of the Lord your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave your forehead for the sake of the dead.

As "sons of the Lord [their] God," the people were to follow Him exclusively. Therefore they shouldn't grieve like people who served other gods. Some of the Canaanites cut themselves with knives; others shaved the front of their heads to mourn the loss of a loved one. As verse 2 makes clear, the children of God should be distinct from the children of other gods:

2 "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

Holiness has a moral component based on the character of God. Murder (taking an innocent life) and lying (speaking something that you know is false) are unholy because God is the giver of life and because God speaks only truth. But here being “a holy people” primarily means being set apart (different) from all the peoples on the face of the earth. Because God chose them to be His people, they were to be unmistakably different from everybody else.

One of the many ways that the Jewish nation was to be “holy” involved their diet, what they ate.

3 “You shall not eat any detestable thing.

The term detestable is often translated “abominable” (e.g., Deut. 7:25-26). Some things were deemed “detestable” because they were associated with Canaanite idolatry (see 7:25, 12:31, 13:14, etc.). But when an animal was given the designation “detestable,” it didn’t mean that the animal was evil; everything God created was good. Rather, in a restricted sense, an animal was detestable if God declared it unclean for the Jews **as food**.

In verses 4 through 20 Moses gives lists of “clean” animals (those that **can** be eaten) and lists of “unclean” animals (those that **cannot** be eaten). The list reflects the categories of the creation account, listing animals that move on land (vv. 4-8), those that swim in the sea (vv. 9-10), and those that fly in the air (vv. 11-20).

As you are probably aware, there are a number of different explanations for why some animals were deemed clean and others unclean. One view is that the clean animals were more healthy for human consumption. Another view is that the unclean animals were associated with Canaanite idolatry. The bottom line is that we simply don’t know why certain animals were declared clean and others unclean. The text doesn’t tell us. The emphasis is that these dietary regulations set Israel apart from all the other peoples. As children of the Lord their God, they needed to obey Him and follow these regulations. God had the authority to define what holiness looked like under the Law (what we call the old covenant).

Land animals (*Deuteronomy 14:4-8*) In these verses Moses gives a list of land animals that could and couldn’t be eaten.

4 “These are the animals which you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, 5 the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex [probably a type of goat], the antelope and the mountain sheep.

Verse 6 gives the criteria explaining why they could eat these animals (why they were clean):

6 “Any animal that divides the hoof and has the hoof split in two and chews the cud, among the animals, that you may eat.

For an animal to be on the “edible” list, two things had to be true: it had to have a divided (or split) hoof and it had to chew the cud. As verses 7 and 8 explain, if only one of these things was true of an animal it was unclean and therefore couldn’t be eaten.

7 “Nevertheless, you are not to eat of these among those which chew the cud, or among those that divide the hoof in two: the camel and the rabbit and the shaphan [a rock badger], for though they chew the cud, they do not divide the hoof; they are unclean for you. 8 “The pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, it is unclean for you. You shall not eat any of their flesh nor touch their carcasses.

Again, there is no explanation of why these criteria were given for clean and unclean animals. It may be that the rationale was obvious to the children of Israel, but maybe not. Whatever the case, it was clear what was clean and unclean.

Sea Creatures (Deuteronomy 14:9-10)

9 “These you may eat of all that are in water: anything that has fins and scales you may eat, 10 but anything that does not have fins and scales you shall not eat; it is unclean for you.

Bass, crappie, and bluegills were clean; shrimp, crawfish, and catfish were unclean.

Birds of the Air (Deuteronomy 14:9-10)

11 “You may eat any clean bird.

The clean birds aren’t listed, but would include birds like quail and doves. On the other hand Moses gives a long list of unclean birds; they are primarily birds of prey and scavengers:

12 “But these are the ones which you shall not eat: the eagle and the vulture and the buzzard, 13 and the red kite, the falcon, and the kite in their kinds, 14 and every raven in its kind, 15 and the ostrich, the owl, the sea gull, and the hawk in their kinds, 16 the little owl, the great owl, the white owl, 17 the pelican, the carrion vulture, the cormorant, 18 the stork, and the heron in their kinds, and the hoopoe [pronounced hoo-poo] and the bat. 19 “And all the teeming life with wings are unclean to you; they shall not be eaten. 20 “You may eat any clean bird.

“Teeming life with wings” referred to certain types of insects. Leviticus 11 gives more detail about which insects were clean and unclean. It’s pretty interesting. . . Four-legged insects that have “jointed legs” are clean (such as locusts, katydids, crickets, and grasshoppers!).

Verse 21 speaks of animals that are found dead.

21 “You shall not eat anything which dies of itself. You may give it to the alien who is in your town, so that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner, for you are a holy people to the Lord your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.

The reason that the Israelites couldn’t eat an animal found dead was most likely because it hadn’t been killed properly and then drained of blood (and not because it would be contaminated). (See Leviticus 17 - prohibition again “eating blood” because “the life of a creature is in the blood”; there is a sense in which blood is sacred because life is sacred [NIV Study Bible note on Lev. 17:11])

Given that the Deuteronomy repeatedly tells the Israelites to “love the sojourner” and treat them well, it is highly unlikely that Moses is saying that it’s okay to give contaminated food to the “foreigners.” Unless they had become Jews, they weren’t living under the Law, so they didn’t have to process animals the way the children of Israel did.

Notice in verse 21 Moses mentions again that “you are a holy people to the Lord your God”; he is repeating what he said in verse 2. Therefore the statement “you are a holy people” serves as bookends for this passage, confirming that verses 3 through 20 are about Israel’s holiness.

Yet again Moses gives no explanation why he says, “you shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.” I asked a veterinarian’s opinion on this verse; she said, “That just doesn’t sound like a good idea.” It’s possible that the Canaanites boiled young goats in their mothers’ milk as a worship ritual. It’s possible that boiling a young goat in its mother’s milk was seen as cruel and wrong; other passages advocate kindness toward animals. [Btw, many years later this verse served as the basis of kosher laws which separated dairy and meat.]

The bottom line was that the Israelites couldn’t eat without thinking of God. Every time they ate the meat of clean animals, they were declaring that they were a holy people, separate from all the peoples of the earth. Because eating was a rhythm of their lives, they were reminded of their distinctiveness as the people of God every time they ate food.

Transition to the New Covenant: (Acts 10-11, Mark 7:14-23)

Imagine growing up meticulously keeping the Law - not in some legalistic sense, but as an expression of your love for God and for your neighbor. Keeping the dietary regulations found in Deuteronomy 14 were part of your wholehearted devotion to God. You could not fathom how you could both love God **and** eat unclean animals. That was Peter’s situation. Jesus had taught the disciples that what goes into your stomach doesn’t defile you; what defiles you is what comes out of your heart. But it wasn’t clear that the entire dietary code of the Mosaic covenant was being set aside.

Acts 10 records how Peter became hungry. While his meal was being prepared, he went up on the housetop to pray. That's when God gave him a vision instructing him to kill and eat unclean animals. This vision convinced Peter that because there were no longer any unclean foods, there were no longer any unclean people (based on their diet). And so for the first time in his life Peter ate with Gentiles.

Let's read a portion of Acts 11 which summarizes what happened in Acts 10:

2 And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, 3 saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." 4 But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, 6 and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. 7 "I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 "But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 "But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' 10 "This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky.

Since there were no longer unclean foods, there were no longer unclean people based on what they eat. No restrictions on diet meant that there were no longer any restrictions on who could receive the gospel and the Holy Spirit. Under the new covenant we can have table fellowship with anybody; therefore we can develop honest spiritual friendships with anybody; therefore God can use us to take the gospel to anybody.

The categories of clean and unclean animals are now obsolete. This doesn't mean that we can eat whatever we want without thinking about God or anybody else. But it does mean that *what* we eat has no spiritual significance in and of itself. But just like the Israelites, our eating and drinking should still be an expression of our holiness. We should still seek to honor God with food and drink.

What should guide our eating and drinking?

Gratitude (1 Timothy 4:1-5) In this passage Paul instructs Timothy in a way that is very consistent with what we've seen so far concerning food restrictions.

1 But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, 3 men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.

Paul warns against people whose consciences are so insensitive that it's as if it's been cauterized (seared with a branding iron). We aren't told exactly why they taught what

they did, but they taught you shouldn't get married and that you had to abstain from eating certain foods. Perhaps they taught a type of asceticism that said salvation comes through self-denial; perhaps they taught that sexual relations and certain types of food defiled a person.

Did you notice how Paul described "foods" (and perhaps marriage also) in verse 3? ". . . which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth." Those who believe and know the truth about God and about Jesus have the greatest capacity to enjoy creation because they are rightly related to the Creator. They understand that God is the giver of all good gifts, including food. Notice how Paul continues:

4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; 5 for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.

Instead of rejecting a good gift from God, the proper response is to receive it with gratitude, genuinely giving thanks to God that you have food to enjoy and to give you nourishment. Food is "sanctified by means of the word of God" in the sense that God's word tells us that food is a good gift from God. If we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," it's only right that we close the circle by giving thanks.

Instead of giving thanks as a mere formality, we can see food as providing an opportunity to cultivate the habit of expressing to God our gratitude. I know how easy it is to mindlessly eat food without thinking about God. But if we have a mind to do so we can express thanks to God for many things:

- those who have grown the food I'm eating
- the dozens (or hundreds) of hands that got it from the field to my mouth
- the incredible abundance we have (in contrast to those who have so little)
- the pleasures of interesting flavors and textures and colors of food
- the miracle of the human body which transforms food into fuel

You get the idea. Just as the old covenant dietary laws forced Israel to declare her holiness throughout the day, expressing gratitude every time we eat can do something similar. This week try slowing down and expressing to God your sincere gratitude every time you eat; it could be an on-ramp to a conversational relationship with God throughout the day.

Love (1 Corinthians 10:23-33, Romans 14:13-23) In the first century, Christians wrestled with the issue of meat that had been sacrificed to idols and then sold at the market or served to you by one of your unbelieving friends. Paul establishes that it's not enough to ask, "Is this permissible?" We also have to ask, "Is eating this profitable? Will it cause others to stumble? Will it give offense to people I'm trying to influence for Christ?" Paul gives his conclusion in 1 Corinthians 10:31-33.

31 Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; 33 just as I

also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.

Imagine the possibilities if we really made it our ambition to glorify God when we eat or drink. What if we asked God the question, “How can I love others and show them how amazing You are through food and drink?” Let me give three ideas/examples (there are many others).

First, as Paul mentions here in 1 Corinthians 10, we’ll seek to avoid causing others to stumble. Years ago I knew a woman who had been raised in a cult that followed the old covenant dietary laws. She and her husband had become believers and fully understood that your standing before God has nothing to do with what you eat. She understood that a person is saved “by grace through faith.” But she just could not bring herself to eat shrimp or pork or catfish. We talked about it; she knew that there was nothing wrong with such foods. But her conscience wouldn’t let her eat those foods. So, in light of 1 Corinthians 10 and Romans 14, if she came over to your house for supper, you shouldn’t serve fried catfish or crawfish. You would limit your freedom to avoid giving offense.

In similar manner, we should avoid drinking or serving alcohol around others who are alcoholic or who might be tempted to excess.

Second, we’ll seek out ways to feed the hungry. We’ll talk about this next week when we consider Deuteronomy 15; we as a believing community have a responsibility to be generous toward the poor in our midst and beyond. That will certainly include feeding the hungry.

Third, ask the question, “How does food provide an opportunity to connect with people?” This idea comes from Peter’s experience in Acts 10. Some of you have gifts of hospitality; you very naturally welcome people into your home and make them feel like family. Often times hospitality involves food. About the only thing we have in common with some people is that we both eat food. Food provides an opportunity to connect with people and build relationships.

At a conference recently the speaker encouraged us, “Pray for the people who serve you (at restaurants and coffee shops). Ask them ‘How can I pray for you?’” As a pastor and an extrovert that sounded like a great idea. The lady who prepared the breakfast at our hotel wanted prayer for her father in the hospital and for a new career for herself (single mom going back to school). The young man who served me a hamburger said, “Pray that I wouldn’t get too far from God.” The lady at Dillons (who’s served me for about a decade) said, “Pray for my mother in the hospital.” Food can be a prompt to reach out to people we might otherwise ignore.

“Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”