

The Real Meaning Of Kosher

For Believers of all ilks and labels, next to Sabbath, probably the dietary laws are the most controversial and puzzling aspects of the Law of Moses and of Judaism in general. I have probably had more questions than any other about kosher eating and whether that is really still intended for non-Jewish Believers (or even for Jewish Believers) in Christ or not. And when I explain that, yes, keeping biblically kosher (as opposed to keeping Rabbinically kosher) ought to be part of every Believer's life, immediately the questioner refers to the Gospel of Mark as evidence that perhaps followers of Yeshua have been relieved of that duty. So, what are we to think?

But, there's another issue about the biblical food laws that is crucial. We have to understand them before we can discern any Old or New Testament narrative about two subjects: what we can eat and ritual purity, because they are two different things that are nearly universally all mixed up in the minds of Christians and Jews, and so we wind up with wrong scriptural interpretations, which then results in strange doctrines. It's going to take a lot of focus on your part as I go through this, but it will be worth your while.

Let's begin by examining just where in the Bible we find the dietary laws. Turn your Bibles to Leviticus chapter 11.

READ LEVITICUS CHAPTER 11 all

Here in the Torah are what I refer to as the laws of biblical kosher. These are what God says we are to do and not do about consuming animals in our diets. But... pay close attention to the final verse because it tells us what the purpose of these laws are.

CJB Leviticus 11:47 *Its purpose is to distinguish between the unclean and the clean, and between the creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten.*"

What is critical to note is that there is something called clean and unclean, and there is a separate and different something about distinguishing between

creatures that can be eaten versus those that can't. In other words, the terms clean and unclean are NOT synonymous with describing which specific animals can be eaten versus those that can't. Rather these laws of Leviticus are divided into 2 sets, each dealing with very different aspects of food laws, and yet both apply. So, let's set about unpacking these 2 sets of rules about food and what impact they have...or don't have... on modern Believers.

I want to go about this challenging subject by first talking about it in more basic and general terms before we get into the technical and nuanced aspects. As a means to open the topic, I want to quote the noted Hebrew scholar Daniel Boyarin as he points out the following: "The notions of Judaism as legalistic and rule-bound, as a grim reality of religious anxiety versus Jesus' completely new teaching of love and faith, die very hard". Daniel Boyarin is one of the top Torah and Talmud scholars living today, and he is also a Believer in Yeshua as the Jewish Messiah. And he, as do I, observes that the biblical dietary laws seem to arouse more consternation and downright grumpiness among Christian worshipers of the God of Israel than almost any other element of the biblical Law. While among Jews there are debates over exactly HOW to keep kosher, among Christians the issue is whether keeping kosher is something that has any place in Christianity whatsoever, but even more that it probably is a sin to even try. And again, they usually point to Yeshua and/or Paul as having established that.

As Boyarin says, some things just die hard. We going to take some time today to examine this subject in perhaps a way that you either hadn't considered, or that perhaps you had simply not known about. In order to set the stage, I'll propose a basic premise that those who have followed Torah Class have heard from me for many years. And this premise is taken from Christ's most famous oracle: the Sermon on the Mount.

CJB Matthew 5:17-19 ***17 "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete. 18 Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened. 19 So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.***

My premise then is this: Christ did NOT abolish the Law of Moses and, whether Gentiles or Jews, all who trust in the God of Israel are to continue to obey it. Without equivocation or exception, and not in parable or metaphor but rather in the plainest of language, and given in the form of an unmistakable statement of divine policy, Yeshua says that absolutely nothing that He says should ever be construed as making the Torah (the Laws of Moses in this case) something that is dead and gone, nor has He changed it in any way, nor will it become irrelevant until a time far into the future when indeed the present heavens and earth pass away and are fully re-created into something new and different. Thus, when we read other statements in the Gospels about Christ's many sayings, and when we read other writers of New Testament books, this is the needed context by which we must view and interpret those words.

With that in mind, let us now turn to Mark 7 and one of the most controversial passages in the Bible.

READ MARK 7:1 - 19

We won't spend as much time dissecting this passage as I would like to. Rather I want to show you that a basic premise of understanding the principles of kosher eating is at the heart of the common misunderstanding of this most interesting narrative. This is so vital for us to grasp because, in many respects, it is the conventional readings of Mark 7 that for Christian leadership helps to cement the parting of the ways between Judaism and the Constantinian Christian Church.

What is plainly biblical fact is that diet is a vitally important to God, it is part of how He intends for humans to live and thrive, and that kosher eating is therefore not a trivial matter of personal choice or cultural options. It might never have occurred to you, but the so-called "original sin" committed by Adam that brought death into the world involved food. Recall that there were trees in the Garden of Eden that bore edible fruit. Adam and Eve were given free reign to eat the fruit of all of those trees EXCEPT for the fruit borne by a tree called the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. You see, Christians for centuries have tried to make the tree itself as a metaphor for choosing good or evil, but in fact the tree was

literal, real, and bore actual fruit. Rather the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is the **name** assigned to the tree and indeed the name is the metaphor.

Thus, God gave Adam and Eve a Torah that consisted of but one commandment: and it might surprise you to notice that the one commandment was a dietary law. The first and only rule Adam and Eve were subject to involved what they could and could not eat. They were prohibited from eating the fruit from that one particular tree, but permitted to eat the fruit of all the other trees. So, if we want to understand just how serious God is about what His worshippers eat, and how foundational a matter of diet is in the Bible, remember that the original sin involved breaking God's dietary law long before there was a Hebrew people, and long before the Israelites were given the Law of Moses on Mt. Sinai. So, to think that God only cares about what the Jewish people eat, but doesn't care about what others eat, simply disregards biblical reality.

Let me be clear, however; no one can keep *perfectly* biblically kosher in the most technical sense in our era because those laws often necessitate a functioning Temple and a Priesthood, neither of which exists today. However, avoiding what is clearly prohibited in the lists of acceptable and unacceptable foods for humans to eat is easy and straightforward. And, I might add, hardly restrictive at all since it mainly deals with meat and not produce.

It was the Pharisees who first made their appearance around 160 B.C. that attempted to extend and amplify and add-to those very few and straightforward biblical laws about food in Leviticus 11. One of the things they did was to make it that eating food that had become impure from something or another, had the effect of making the body of the consumer of that food ritually impure. There is no biblical regulation by which eating kosher food that has been defiled makes the body of the eater of that food defiled. So, the Pharisees (who evolved to become that group of Jewish religious leaders called Rabbis, and then created the huge body of work called Tradition or Jewish law) instituted a custom of ritual hand washing before eating their food so that their hands would not accidentally defile their meal.

The debate that we read about in Mark 7, then, is not that there was an argument being made by Yeshua that what a person could eat no longer mattered; that

now it could be anything that person wished. That is, He was not saying that the biblical kosher food laws had been greatly changed or done away with. Rather the issue was ritual cleanness. As we'll soon get into, the matter of which foods were permitted are but part of establishing that something is kosher to eat. The other part is that the permitted food must also be consumed when it is in a state of ritual purity. I know that might sound strange, even confusing, but we'll continue to untangle it. So, the Pharisees were trying to enforce their ritual hand washing rules (a manmade tradition), and said that since Yeshua and His disciples had not properly washed their hands in the ways of this tradition, they had defiled their food that otherwise would have been OK to eat. And that if their food became defiled then also their bodies...their flesh, blood and bones... would become ritually impure and so they would be walking around the Temple (and elsewhere) in an unclean condition and could infect people or objects they came in contact with. To this, Yeshua said nonsense. Permitted food that had become impure (unclean) and was eaten did NOT make the flesh and blood and bones of the consumer unclean. Further, that the Pharisees' ritual hand washing procedure didn't lend to making food clean or unclean. Christ was not challenging the biblical food laws; He was rejecting the Pharisees' attempt to foist their newly minted traditions concerning ritual purity that went well beyond their biblical basis.

Let me say that in another way: Mark 7 is an argument about Jewish religious doctrines among Jews (Yeshua versus the Pharisees) concerning the correct way to keep the Torah food laws; it was not an attack by either the Pharisees or Yeshua ON the Torah food laws nor was it an attempt to say those Torah food laws were abolished. Rather, Yeshua was rejecting the notion of human precepts (traditions and doctrines) replacing or amending biblical laws and commands. And remember: the ONLY Bible that Yeshua or any of his disciples or followers ever knew of is what we call the Old Testament, because the New Testament would not even come into existence for almost 2 centuries AFTER Yeshua was executed.

I want to add one other bit of information that I have presented in other forums. It is that Yeshua had NO authority to add to, or subtract from, the Law of Moses. The only authority Yeshua was given by His Father was to carry out everything necessary to effect forgiveness of sin and salvation...which necessarily involved

paying the price for sins. The Constantinian Church has for at least 15 centuries claimed that because we read in the New Testament that Jesus was given all authority (as stated in Matthew 28), then that means He was given the authority by the Father to make all new rules and to redefine the old established ones, and to essentially replace the Father. That is, Christ could add-to, subtract-from, or abolish the moral law code that the Father had established (the Law of Moses). This is not true and is a complete misinterpretation of what was said, something Christ said so Himself in Matthew 5 and warned that NO ONE should think that He came to abolish the Torah and that not one iota of it would change until Heaven and Earth passed away. Bottom line: Yeshua didn't change the kosher food laws because He couldn't.

Before we move on, I'd like to offer this interesting tidbit that you can use to amaze and impress your friends. There has actually been a lot of scholarly dickering over the centuries about whether the hand washing procedure in Mark 7 actually can be connected to the modern Orthodox Jewish hand washing rituals, and thus prove that indeed we can view it from that perspective. In Mark 7 verse 3, most Bibles render the verse:

^{NAS} **Mark 7:3** *(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders;*

The Greek word being translated as hands is **pugme** (poog-may). And it is only within the last couple of decades that language scholarship has finally agreed to translate it by its literal meaning, since once we do that it makes the most sense. The literal meaning is "fist". If you watch an Orthodox Jew do a ritual hand washing, you will notice that a loose fist is formed with one hand and water gets poured over that loose fist from a cup held in the other hand (and then this is repeated in the reverse). This is exactly what is being reported by the Gospel writer of the Book of Mark and so this way of washing hands that we see among the modern Orthodox Jews was in existence in Yeshua's time.

So, let's sum up how, in the most foundational and simple way, we can apply this to our lives.

First, let's be very clear. To NOT eat biblically kosher is sin. It is just as much sin as is stealing or telling a lie. It is NOT a minor thing and it is not optional or a non-essential. When the Lord spends an entire chapter in the Bible instructing us in this matter, it is because it is important to Him. God has created a wide spectrum of living creatures to serve a variety of needed services and purposes on earth. Some of those purposes is for one species to serve as food for another species. Humans are the highest of the species, and so we may eat of some...but not all...of the lower species. And, Believers, you and I do NOT get to choose which is which; God has laid it out quite carefully before us.

So, in what way do we have choices? Humans have been given two different categories of choice in our lives: moral choice and preference. The first category is revealed in God's laws, as expressed in the Law of Moses, and it tells us exactly what morality is, and we're told that to not obey a moral law is sin. Thus, God has said that such things as murder, adultery, using His Name in vain, theft, not observing the 7th day Sabbath, and eating things He has said NOT to eat are all immoral and therefore sins. On the other hand, there is a second category of choices (preferences) that we are free to make without consequence. What flavor of spices we like, what car we choose to drive, where we choose to live, what we choose as an occupation, how much our governments choose to tax us, what time we get up in the morning and go to bed at night...on and on. Preferences have nothing to do with morality, and therefore preferences do not amount to sin. But, when we incorrectly say that God's laws of morality have been abolished by Jesus (the Law of Moses was terminated), then we no longer have a God-given standard of morality to go by, and the lines between what is moral and what is preference become blurred. As concerns today's topic, food can be a preferential choice, but only to a point. Generally speaking, we can consume any edible plant without consequence. But, the consumption of animals is an entirely different matter. We may eat some animals, but others we may not, so now it becomes a matter of morality.

Don't like that? Then argue with God about it and not with me. I'm just a messenger here to tell you what God says about it in His Word, as opposed to whatever your or my personal opinion on it might be.

Second, as hard as it can be, we need to disassociate what the Bible says from what the Orthodox Jews practice. What the Bible says about diet is rather easy and straightforward. But, Judaism has added level after level of complexities via manmade rules and traditions that makes it seem as though to eat biblically kosher...to obey God concerning our diet...is too hard and complex to ever successfully do. Even so there are other nuances we do need to understand.

Third. In the end, here's the Reader's Digest version of how to eat biblically kosher. Don't eat pork, shellfish, or any type of sea creature that doesn't have fins and scales. Don't eat any larger animal that doesn't have a cloven hoof or doesn't chew its cud. If it has paws you can't eat it. Also, if a bird specifically eats dead things, don't eat them. So, to give you a basic list: eat beef, lamb, chicken, turkey, duck, deer, moose, elk, and most fish. Do NOT eat bear, rabbit, ham or bacon, clams, oysters, shrimp, lobster or crab. That pretty well is it. If you do that, generally speaking you are eating a biblically kosher diet. And, one other thing: you are perfectly free to eat dairy with meat. Yes, you can have a cheeseburger. The laws of not eating dairy and meat together are Jewish traditions and are not part of the biblical food laws.

Now I'll attempt to answer some of the situations you'll immediately face when you begin to eat kosher. You'll of course be asked the absurd: so, what if you are trapped out in the wilderness or on a desert island and there is nothing else available to eat except things that are NOT kosher. Does God expect us to starve to death? Of course not. A basic biblical principle is that preservation of innocent life trumps biblical rules and regulations. So, for those of you worried about it, I can assure you that the next time you are washed up on a desert isle, ala Tom Hanks in the movie Castaway, and all there is to eat is crab, God will afford you mercy. The next situation you'll encounter, however, is far more likely. You'll be invited to someone's home who doesn't eat kosher, and isn't aware that you do. This is much more dicey to deal with and what you choose to do is going to require wisdom. I have been placed in this situation more than a few times, and here is what I do. When I'm first invited, I usually inform them that I eat biblically kosher and tell them what that means. I've never been uninvited after I do. It is very much cultural, today, that a host will ask if you have food allergies or restrictions. So, it won't unnerve them if you say "yes, I do. I try to eat biblically kosher so I won't be able to eat pork, shrimp or shellfish". But, should you find

yourself in a situation where perhaps you are part of a group, or the host doesn't know you are kosher and serves things that are not kosher, usually you can simply select the available items that are OK to eat and avoid the non-kosher. Since meat is the primary subject of kosher food, and since vegetarianism is so prevalent, you are almost certainly not going to offend. On the other hand, if the host has no understanding or concept of kosher eating, then one will have to make a decision as to which is best: to bear the sin of eating prohibited food, or to greatly offend your host. But, be aware that while not offending your host is always a good thing, even so that doesn't make the eating of non-kosher food at his/her table any the less a sin.

There you have it. Eating kosher is not that complicated or hard, but realizing that we are commanded to do so and then willing ourselves to obey *can* at first be a bit challenging. Soon, however, you won't even think about it; it will become automatic. Might you miss certain things you had been eating before you decided to know and obey God's laws on the matter? Probably. Will you have relatives and friends think you're some kind of fanatic or have become Jewish? No doubt.

Now that we have discussed the matter in general, let's move to the technical and nuanced. What I will be teaching you is that there has been a fundamental misunderstanding within Judeo-Christianity of how the food laws work, and that apart from the listing of animals that it is permitted to eat there is also a separate set of rules of clean and unclean...of ritual purity... that can make the otherwise permitted food unsuitable to eat.

Let's refer back to our Mark 7 lesson. In a greatly condensed paraphrase, most Christian scholars say that in Mark 7 Jesus has said that kosher eating is hereby abrogated, because nothing is unclean of itself. And further that from a reality standpoint, it doesn't matter what one eats; food of any kind can never defile the person who eats it. Rather it is what comes out of a person that causes them to be unclean in God's eyes. Then verse 19 ends with the words: ***Thus, He declared all foods to be ritually clean.*** If your Bible is like most, it will have brackets around those words, and that is because they are only found in some of the later Greek manuscripts. The oldest Greek manuscripts do NOT have those words included. Thus, it is generally acknowledged by Bible scholars that these final words of verse 19 are what is called a gloss that was added by some unknown editor at

some later date (there's a handful of those glosses to be found in the Bible). A later editor essentially added some words to that document or letter that he thought would better clarify a passage's meaning, or equally as likely, to stake claim to a particular theological viewpoint and agenda.

Let me state without hesitation that this gloss ought to be removed as should all glosses because it gives those who do not understand the Torah and the Laws of Moses (which includes nearly all Christians) an incorrect perception of what is being said and the topic that is being debated. And further, that whatever it is that Yeshua was saying in Mark 7 it was NOT that all foods that were reasonably fit for human consumption were now on the menu for the Jewish people, as opposed to how it had been until that moment.

So, I'll circle around and again set up a very basic premise that might startle you, and then nuance it a bit. The basic biblical dietary laws begin with what animals are permitted and those that are prohibited for food. But, this matter of prohibited and permitted is **not** the same thing as that food being clean or unclean. Rather the issue of clean and unclean...ritual purity... is addressed in the 2nd half of Leviticus 11. The terms clean and unclean belong to a connected, yet different, set of rules about food and animals. Even though the common vernacular when referring to kosher eating is of clean and unclean, in fact that is not correct and it can greatly confuse the situation. In fact, it has been suggested to me that rather than saying that as Believers we ought to eat kosher, it would be better to say we ought to eat biblically clean. The thought being that kosher is technically a term used only within Judaism that applies to the huge set of Rabbinic laws about eating and diet...Jewish traditions...and not to the biblical Law of Moses....and this is true to a point. However, to refer to a proper God-ordained diet as eating biblically clean is also not a proper nuance because that is taken to mean that clean foods amount to the same list of foods permitted by God...and this, too, is not true...or better, it is only a half-truth.

Although in the Bible animals that are not kosher are at times referred to as impure or unclean animals (impure and unclean are synonymous terms) that might not have anything to do with whether they are on the Ok-to-eat list. That is because food purity has to do not with what the food items are, but rather with how those food items must be handled in order to attain and/or maintain their

ritual status of clean. Let me give you a few examples. Meat must be drained of its blood before it is cooked and eaten. Therefore, as much blood as possible must be removed, which is at least partly why food animals cannot be killed by strangulation. This also means you can't eat raw meat. Another requirement is that the animal is to be killed humanely, which means quickly and with the least pain possible. Certain organ meats and the fat surrounding them are not to be consumed (those items are only allowed for use as burnt offerings). One must assure, as far as possible, that something dead (like a mouse or a lizard) hasn't come into contact with the meat. Should this or a few more possibilities occur, the meat is rendered unclean, and therefore inedible.

So, how can you know for absolute certain that your meat has been handled properly, since nearly all of us buy our meat from a Supermarket shelf? Truthfully, unless you raise and slaughter the animal, and store the meat yourself, you can't. That said, our Western food laws require humane killing of the animals, and that no vermin come into contact with meat, etc. Since it is physically impossible to be with that meat from field to table, then we have to reasonably assume that those laws are being obeyed. In 1Corinthians 8 Paul speaks of the principle of not eating food offered to idols. But...he explains, if you don't know if it has been offered to an idol...and have no reason to think it might have been... then it's OK to assume it hasn't and go ahead and eat it. So, for those of you who now might be concerned about the meat you buy from your Supermarket meeting these biblical standards, assume that it does because our laws say they must, and because there is no way to be 100% assured. And, by the way, the most Ultra-Orthodox of Jews don't even completely believe that their Rabbi food supervisors can be 100% trusted, so they find it best to be a vegan to remove all doubt. By no means do I suggest such a thing.

So, as we look deeper into the dietary laws of Leviticus 11, we find that the biggest obstacle to correctly understanding those rules regarding diet has been the confusing application of the words clean and unclean to refer to BOTH the laws concerning permitted and forbidden foods (food that God allows to be on our menu versus those that are not), and also the laws of how things that can be on our menu can become polluted with impurity and thus rendered inedible. And gentiles, don't be thinking that all Jews understand this; very few even Orthodox Jews do (even though their more scholarly Rabbis do understand).

Kosher food revolves around the use of the Hebrew word *muttar*, which means permitted. The laws of ritual purity of food items revolve around the Hebrew word *tahor*, which means clean. Thus, when speaking of animals that are considered allowable for us to eat the correct term is permitted...and NOT clean.

From a biblical perspective prohibited foods are NOT food. Let that sink in for a second. So, to speak of a prohibited food is an oxymoron. Let me say that another way. In the Bible, should the subject of food come up, the ONLY thing it is referring to is permitted food because if an item is prohibited, it is not food in the first place. Thus, when the word food is used in the Bible), it is ONLY referring to biblically allowable food as opposed to something that from a scientific standpoint could be used for human consumption without causing our bodies harm.

One final thing and we'll conclude this study. The biblical kosher dietary laws are part and parcel of God's moral law code (the Law of Moses), and so to break them is disobedience and sin. On the other hand, the laws of ritual purity (clean and unclean) are usually not considered as sin, and thus the treatment of the person who has become ritually impure due to some kind of contact with something that is impure usually amounts to little more than being immersed in water and then waiting a certain amount of time (usually until the end of the current day). The only time the matter of becoming unclean turns into sin is when a person refuses to follow the biblical prescription for becoming clean again. So, people can become impure without having done anything morally wrong... without sinning in any way. Therefore, a person who has contracted ritual uncleanness doesn't have to offer a sacrifice because no sin was committed.

As concerns Believers, both our sins and impurities have been accounted for by Yeshua. His blood has atoned for our sins, and He as living water has purified our uncleanness. But that hardly means that the laws of diet and impurity have been done away with.

I pray that as you contemplate what has been explained, you will continue to eat kosher if you have been, and begin to eat kosher if you have not, but either way you now have a better understanding of what is behind it all. For all that we have

discussed is God's law, not mans, and it is our duty as His worshippers to be faithful to Him and obedient to His laws and commands.