

## Unclean Foods in the New Testament

Are Biblical guidelines regarding clean and unclean meats applicable to Christians today? Were these laws only for the Jews during Old-Testament times? Have teachings in the New Testament done away with restrictions against unclean foods?

As a rule, Jews and Muslims don't eat pork, but many Christians do because they believe the [Old Testament dietary restrictions](#) no longer apply. The question is, Did God lay these restrictions only upon the Jews? No. As has been shown in [Clean and Unclean in the Bible](#), Noah knew about the distinction at the time of the Flood, long before the Jewish nation existed. (See Genesis 7:2-3.)

Nevertheless, many Christians believe that verses in the New Testament remove the restrictions against unclean foods. Let's look at those verses.

### Peter's vision in Acts 10

Acts 10 gives the story of the apostle Peter being sent to preach to Cornelius, a Gentile.

When Peter is told to "kill, and eat" he says, "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean" (Acts 10:14). Peter was never taught by Jesus to eat anything "common or unclean." He knew that God never changes (Malachi 3:6) and that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). He can't believe the Lord would tell him to do this.

"Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean" (Acts 10:17). If the Lord literally told him to eat unclean animals, why would he doubt? Wouldn't the change in dietary laws be obvious? Peter doubted because he realized the vision was symbolic—not referring to literal, unclean animals.

We're told that "while Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee. Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them" (vss. 19–20).

When Peter came to Cornelius's home, he realized, "God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28, emphasis added). The Holy Spirit was given to Gentiles just as He had been given to the Jews on Pentecost. Peter learned that the Gospel message was meant for all the world, not just for the Jews.

The vision was not about dietary laws, but about giving the message to all—because no one is to be considered "unclean," or unreachable by Christ's redemption. The vision used unclean creatures as symbols of Gentile nations now called to come to God through the Gospel.

### Romans 14:14

Romans 14:14 says, "There is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean." Was Paul saying that nothing is unclean?

When Paul says "nothing is unclean of itself," he is saying that we can't always tell just by our own judgment what is clean and unclean. It is determined by the Word of God. If a person feels that something is unclean, then the safe thing to do is avoid eating it since he does not have the faith to eat without misgivings. Only knowledge of God's Word can let our conscience rest in the fact that a particular food is clean or unclean.

However, the context of the verse in Romans 14 points to a deeper crisis in the church. If you compare Romans 14 with 1 Corinthians 8–10, you will see that the same problem is being addressed—friction between two parties in the early church.

Jewish converts aware of dietary laws didn't mind eating clean animals sold in the heathen markets. The Gentile converts thought heathen idols made the sacrificed meat unclean:

*As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. (1 Corinthians 8:4)*

The argument wasn't about dietary laws, but meat sacrificed to heathen idols. Paul urged Jewish and Gentile believers not to condemn each other based on sacrificed meat. Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 8:10–11:

*For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for which Christ died?*

In other words, don't make a brother feel he should ignore his uneasiness and try to eat sacrificed meat anyway. He would feel he is lost because his conscience wouldn't let him rest.

*But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of: for the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. (Romans 14:15–17)*

Paul is not dealing with a moral law here. He is calling for understanding of the tender consciences of weaker brothers. Romans 14 also speaks about esteeming "one day above another" as well as eating (or not eating) sacrificed foods. Both problems focused on observing festivals and sacrifices. Paul did not want new believers swept back into idolatry because some "knowledgeable" person encouraged weaker brothers to view foods sacrificed to idols as "harmless." Paul wanted believers to pay special attention to problems with the weaker brother's conscience.

Paul was not telling believers to ignore either the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments, or the dietary laws laid down by the Creator since the days of Noah. Paul's main concern is that church members be considerate of the spiritual welfare of one another. He advises, "Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Romans 14:13).

### Matthew 15:11

In Matthew 15:11 Jesus says, "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man." Does this mean we can eat whatever we want? There are consequences to everything we eat—good and bad. Eating poorly will harm our bodies, just as eating well will help our bodies maintain health.





This verse needs to be understood in its proper context. It doesn't mean that anything we eat is now good for us regardless of what it is, for we all know that there are many things that can go "into the mouth" and produce dire consequences. Many foods or drugs available to us can harm us, and are not made safe to eat because of this verse.

In Matthew 15:2, the Pharisees criticized Jesus, saying, "Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread." The Pharisees were not really concerned with physical cleanliness. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to obey their washing ritual so any heathen "defilement" would be magically removed.

In verse 15, Peter asks Jesus to explain the parable. He realized there was a deeper meaning than just ritual washing. Jesus explains it this way:

*Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man. (Matthew 15:17-20)*

This passage is not concerned with dietary laws, but rather the fruitlessness of ritual washing while the dark heart remains untouched.

#### 1 Timothy 4:3-4

Doesn't 1 Timothy 4:3-4 tell us that we can eat anything if we pray over it first?

Let's observe what the verses actually say:

*Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving. (1 Timothy 4:3-4)*

Paul is telling Timothy about false believers who will "depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils" (1 Timothy 4:1). They are in error—no longer following the Scriptures.

Paul tells Timothy these false teachers will command people to "abstain from meats." But what kind of meats? 1 Timothy 4:3 tells us these are not unclean meats but meats that "God hath created to be received with thanksgiving." This cannot mean unclean animals, because they were never intended to be eaten!

These clean meats are to be "received with thanksgiving of them that believe and know the truth" (1 Timothy 4:3). Believe and know the truth about what? Obviously, the truth about clean and unclean animals.

1 Timothy 4:4 says, "For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving." This does not mean that every created being is permitted to be eaten. If this were the meaning, cannibalism would be justified. Rather, this verse refers to the previous verse's clean animals which those who "believe and know the truth" will receive "with thanksgiving."

1 Timothy 5:5 describes the meat further: "For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer." Two things sanctify this food—"the word of God" and "prayer." Remember this is the meat that false teachers said could not be eaten. What the false teachers were teaching was in contradiction to God's Word which listed the meat as "clean" (1 Timothy 5:1). By knowing the truth in the Word of God, and receiving these clean animals in a thankful manner with prayer, the true believers would obey God and not the "doctrines of devils."

What would this passage be saying if it referred to unclean instead of clean food? Would it really mean that we could eat anything if we pray over it? Would we allow our children to eat anything, as long as they prayed over it? Not likely! We can expect God, our Father, to give guidance on what is good for us.

It's clear that the New Testament offers nothing to show that Christ made eating unclean meat acceptable for Christians, or that He changed the nature of unclean animals to make their flesh an acceptable, health-giving food for our bodies which are His temple.

In light of these things, the question is, Should Christians eat what is "unfit for human consumption," especially if God never designed the swine, or other unclean beasts to be eaten under any circumstances? Remember that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19) and that whatever you eat or drink should be to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).



Putting health-destroying, blood-polluting “foods” into our bodies is not to the glory of God. This applies to pork and pork by-products and many other “food” items commonly accepted, but that nonetheless lead to disease. Considering that by God’s grace, our bodies are the dwelling place for the Holy Spirit, shouldn’t we do all we can to protect the health of our body temple? Shouldn’t Christians have the highest standard when it comes to eating and drinking?

Nevertheless, for those who need additional information on this subject, consider the scientific evidence that unclean meat is still unfit for human food in [Should Christians Eat Pork?](#) Find out more about [Clean and Unclean in the Bible](#)

#### References

1. The vision comes from heaven, though one would expect such creatures to rise out of the earth, not descend from heaven! This indicates this was symbolic, not literal.
2. Even today we use unclean animals as symbols of nations, such as the American Eagle, the British Lion, the Canadian Beaver, and the Russian Bear.