

Christian Faith and Practice Through...The Dietary Laws

"I know that whatever God does will last forever; there is nothing to add or subtract from it; and God has done it so that people will fear him." (Eccl. 3:14 CJB)

This is another in a continuing series of articles for people who have just begun to submit themselves to the Torah (Instructions) of Yahveh and need a little help in getting started.

The term "dietary laws" is the easiest way to refer to that part of the Torah that relates to things we can eat and things we shouldn't. Of course, by "can eat" I realize that there are many things that we "can" put in our mouths because they fit. But that doesn't mean that we should eat them, because many things that fit in our mouths are not good for us. Some of the things we shouldn't eat taste pretty good (I know because I used to eat them), and sometimes we don't know why Yahveh said not to eat a particular item. All the same, it is, after all, Yahveh who gave us the instructions. An-n-n-n-d that pretty much settles it for me. Isn't it amazing how some people can go around with a bumper sticker that says, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" but have no intention of actually doing what He said?

A lot of the things we shouldn't eat I wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole anyway. So I don't need a Law to tell me not to eat them, as in Deut. 14:19 "don't eat any winged swarming creatures;" like, I don't know, flies or gnats. You wouldn't catch me salivating over a plate full of those, ever; I wouldn't care if the Law said I COULD eat them. I wouldn't even care if you sprinkled them on ice cream. I'm also relieved that He says in Lev. 11:41 not to eat any swarming, creeping thing either. And this is the way a lot of the commands go. Most of them we are already following or it doesn't even occur to us to break them. Yahshua said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mat. 11:28-30, verse 29 quotes Jer. 6:16), meaning all of His Word, including Torah. There are only about 29 laws that directly relate to what we put in our mouth.

N172 De.14:7 Not to eat any unclean animal

N173 Le.11:11 Not to eat any unclean fish

N174 Le.11:13 Not to eat any unclean fowl

N175 De.14:19 Not to eat any creeping winged insect

N176 Le.11:41 Not to eat anything which creeps on the earth

N177 Le.11:44 Not to eat creeping thing that breeds in decayed matter

N178 Le.11:42 Not to eat living creatures that breed in seeds / fruit

N179 Le.11:43 Not to eat any detestable creature

N180 De.14:21 Not to eat any animal which died naturally, a nevelah

N181 Ex.22:30 Not to eat an animal which is torn or mauled, a treifah

N182 De.12:23 Not to eat any limb taken from a living animal

N183 Ge.32:33 Not to eat the sinew of the thigh-vein, gid ha-nasheh
 N184 Le.7:24 Not to eat blood
 N185 Le.7:23 Not to eat certain types of fat of clean animal, chelev
 N186 Ex.23:19 Not to boil young male goat (meat) in its mother's milk
 N187 Ex.34:26 Not to eat young male goat cooked in its mother's milk
 N188 Ex.21:28 Not to eat the flesh of a condemned & to be stoned ox
 N189 Le.23:14 Eat not bread made from grain of new crop, before Omer
 N190 Le.23:14 Eat not roasted grain of new crop, before Omer offering
 N191 Le.23:14 Eat not green ears of new crop, before Omer (Nisan 16)
 N192 Le.19:23 Not to eat orlah
 N193 De.22:9 Eat not growth of mixed vineyard planting, kilai hakerem
 N194 De.32:38 Not to use wine libations for idols, yayin nesach
 N195 Le.19:26; No eating or drinking to excess, gluttony & drunkenness
 N196 Le.23:29 Not to eat anything on Yom Kippur / Day of Atonement
 N197 Ex.13:3 Not to eat chametz, leaven(ed), on Pesach
 N198 Ex.13:7 Not to eat an admixture of chametz/leaven(ed) on Pesach
 N199 De.16:3 Not to eat chametz, leaven(ed), after noon of 14 Nisan
 N200 Ex.13:7 No chametz may be seen in our homes during Pesach
 N201 Ex.12:19 Not to possess chametz, leaven(ed), during Pesach

These are from a list made by a rabbi called Maimonides (My-moan-ee-dehs, I think) somewhere around the 12th century. He grouped different commandments into books by subject, and made a list of all 613 commandments in the Torah (first five books of the Bible; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) that is still used today. A nicely laid out list of these is available on the Wild Branch website (www.wildbranch.org) under the ARTICLES heading and under Articles by Carol Scott. Speaking of the number of commands, it is interesting to note that in Dake's Annotated Reference Bible he identifies about 1,050 commands in the Apostolic Writings (New Testament to some of you).

There is nothing wrong with implementing instructions as you learn (you already have a head start if you are avoiding the swarming flying or crawling things). Right off the bat, though, there are two that will probably be most obvious and perhaps the hardest for you, the ones that tell us not to eat pork and not to eat shellfish. The "no pork" command comes from Deut. 14:3-8, where we are told not to eat anything disgusting (verse 3, and a big amen to that) and that we may eat any animal that has both a cloven hoof and chews the cud (verse 7). The pig is just one example of what not to eat because it has a split hoof but does not chew cud. The instruction to stay away from shellfish comes right on the heels of the command not to eat unclean animals, in Deut. 14:9 and 10. The Father here warns us not to eat anything from the water that does not have fins and scales, so, no clams or lobster or crawdads or oysters or eels or shark or I think you get the picture.

Another instruction that has caused a little confusion is the one found in Exodus 23:19 and a related one found in Exodus 34:26, that of not boiling a kid (or eating a kid boiled) in its mother's milk. The probable reason for this is that it used to be part of a pagan ritual to do this type of thing. Don't ask me why the pagans did it, but this is probably more of a command against idolatry rather than specifically a dietary instruction.

This brings up something called the Oral Law. This is a group of interpretations or rulings on Torah that are supposed to have started with some contributions from Moses, to which various leaders of Israel have added over the centuries. It used to be handed down orally (hence the name Oral Law), but sometime in the second century it was written down in order to help the Jews maintain their identity as they dispersed from the Land. I personally think it should have stayed oral because in my opinion Yahveh intended for each generation to search out the meanings for themselves, although writing it down probably served the purpose of maintaining identity for the Jews. But some people elevate Oral Law to the same level as Written Law; we have to be careful because there are many instructions from Yahveh warning us not to add to, or subtract from, His Words (Deut. 4:2, 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:18,19).

Anyway, the leaders wanted to put up a fence around Torah to clarify the commands (how do we define work?) and help prevent people from even coming close to breaking any instruction. Sort of like, fencing around a well so your kid doesn't fall in accidentally. So, one of the "fence" instructions was not to eat dairy and meat together, because you never know if the milk product came from the mother of the meat product. Depending on your viewpoint, this fencing was either an attempt to help or an example of leadership gone haywire. Probably both. Many of the laws of "kashrut" (kawsh-root), meaning kosher, are of this type. In their desire to put up a fence around Torah, the leaders many times unfortunately put up a fence around Yahveh. I don't mean to say all of the Oral Law is this way; a lot of it is very good, as long as it sticks close to Scripture.

At first some of the instructions for diet might seem a little odd. A lot of them do not include reasons from Yahveh why they are not good. We might surmise for ourselves that we need to stay away from shellfish because they feed on waste products (bottom feeders), and if prepared improperly can sicken or kill people because of what's in their flesh. We can also figure out that if pork isn't cooked right it can sicken or kill us too. Gives new meaning to the saying that, "you are what you eat," don't it? But even if we can't figure out a reason that does not give us license to do whatever we want. I read an article in a newspaper one time (now there's a stamp of authority) that stated there was a "porcine virus" in the flesh of pork that cannot be removed by cooking or any other means. This virus supposedly only affects pigs; it doesn't affect humans. But how do they really know? Are we going to take the word of a godless scientist that it is okay to eat bacon after Yahveh made a point of telling us not to? Who are you going to believe, the guy in the pew next to you who says it's okay as long as it's cooked right, or the Almighty Father who says it's not good for you period?

Clean and unclean is another issue. Yahveh calls certain things “food” (or clean, Gen. 1:29,30; 6:21; 9:3) and certain things “not food” (unclean). This even goes back to the Garden, when Yahveh designated the tree of Knowledge as “not food” (don’t eat, Gen. 2:17), while the tree of Life was “food” (eating okay, Gen. 2:16). “Food” is always food, and “not food” was never “food.” Food could be eaten and it would not make one unfit to offer a sacrifice. “Not food” would make a person unable to offer a sacrifice. The reason the unclean food would defile a person may have had something to do with the unhealthy nature of the “not food.” It really doesn’t matter to me why, because I believe there are supernatural blessings that come with Torah submission, due to lining up with the Will and Spirit of Yahveh.

If you need some help deciding what to buy at the grocery store, look for the K or the KD on the front label. This is a symbol meaning that somewhere a rabbi has examined the ingredients and manufacturing process to determine if the product conforms to kosher laws. You can look at the ingredients, of course, but sometimes you can’t tell if something unclean or “not food” is part of the food. For instance, gelatin is fairly common in food products, but they usually don’t tell you if the gelatin contains pork or not. For a long time I didn’t realize that pepperoni contained pork, so I kept happily munching away on pepperoni pizza. I thought I had read a package at the store that said pepperoni was beef; I might have seen the rare package that was just beef but maybe I just misread the package. You can have your own beef pepperoni made at a butcher shop if you want it that bad, or you can buy turkey pepperoni (it tastes really good).

These terms always apply, so when you read the Apostolic Writings (NT) concerning food, it always refers to the things Yahveh declared food. “Food” rulings never applied to “not food.” For instance, when Yahshua declared that, “whatever goes into a man doesn’t defile him” (Mat. 15:7-20; Mk. 7:14-23), he would not have been talking about, say, poison hemlock. Just because you can stick poison hemlock in your mouth, and just because it won’t make you ceremonially unclean, doesn’t mean it won’t kill you. And it most definitely doesn’t mean that it’s okay to put it in your body. Hemlock poison is also all natural and made from a plant (coincidentally called poison hemlock), but that still doesn’t make it good for us. Many times people are so busy asking if they CAN do a thing they never stop to ask if they SHOULD do a thing. Just because something is slow enough for us to catch it and cook it, or is good to look at, doesn’t mean we should stick it in our mouths. When are we going to stop relying on our own knowledge and rely on the Wisdom of Yahveh?

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. (Gen. 3:6 NASB)

Peter's vision in Acts chapter 10 is another misinterpreted case in point. First, verse 28 is Peter's own explanation of the vision, and it has to do with fellowship between Jew and Gentile. Second, he didn't rise, kill, and eat. Third, the voice never says the animals in the sheet were clean, only that Peter shouldn't call unclean what God has called clean (referring to Gentiles). Fourth, the Apostolic Writings were not in existence at this time, so how would Yahveh have reversed Himself on clean and unclean, and, at the same time, gotten this new teaching out to everybody in the Kingdom? I think it is clear that people twist teachings such as this in order to disguise their own disobedience. Like Brad Scott (Wild Branch) says, "some people think that the Messiah died so we could eat a ham sandwich."

Acts 15 has the text of a letter sent from the congregational leaders in Jerusalem to the Gentile brethren in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. This conference and the resulting letter have been frequently misconstrued by many to "abolish" the Law. Unfortunately, I have a problem with this, because three of the four instructions in the letter are "dietary." If we were going to abolish the Law, or most of it, aren't there a couple or three commandments that would be more appropriate here? Isn't there some real important ones missing like say, I don't know, "thou shalt not murder," or "love God with all your heart, soul, and strength?" Obviously, to me, these four instead were minimum fellowship instructions, to promote immediate fellowship between Jew and Gentile, not an elimination of anything. As if to confirm this, James says in verse 21 that "Moses is taught in the synagogue every Sabbath," a reference to continued learning and growth.

If the Word is read with an unbiased mind it is clear that the dietary instructions, as part of the entire Word of Yahveh, are still in effect and still form a framework that, when filled with the Spirit and followed in faith, are still very, very good for us. Notice in the following verses that grace and truth are equated to His commands.

"My son, don't forget my teaching, keep my commands in your heart; for they will add to you many days, years of life and peace. Do not let grace and truth leave you – bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and esteem in the site of God and of people. Trust in Adonai with all your heart; do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him; then he will level your paths." (Prov. 3:1-8, CJB)

May the One Father bless your submission to His will
Bruce Bertram