

**Text:** Acts 10:9-23

**Title:** Peter's Culinary Lesson

**Truth:** God reinforces with Peter and the Jewish food laws are set aside and cannot be used as a basis for declaring people unclean.

**Date/Location:** Sunday evening January 20, 2013 and Wed 1/10/2024 at FBC

## Introduction

To understand this passage best, let us read Acts 10:15 as well as 10:28.

Maybe you want to highlight those verses in your Bible. These two verses are the keys to unlocking the meaning of the passage and clarifying for anyone who might be hung up on the Mosaic food laws what God's new rules of governance are all about.

### I. The Vision God gave Peter, v. 9-16

A. It is easy to read over the first couple of lines of this section, but just note for a second that Peter went on the housetop to **pray**. He found a place away from the others to have some quiet in order to pray.

B. Now Peter encounters a vision from God, this one not an angel like Cornelius saw at 3pm the prior afternoon. This second revelatory disclosure from God occurred about noon the next day, 21 hours later. God was obviously doing something major to send an angel to a Gentile the day before and now be revealing something new to an apostle.

Note "next day" in verse 9. The distance of around 35 miles may make the next day seem too soon. Was there another day intervening? If a typical person could travel 20 or 25 miles in a day's journey, these men could have traveled quickly in the late afternoon and the early morning the next day. A good runner could make the distance in 8 hours or even less.

C. The mid-day meal was not coming soon enough for Peter. God used his hunger to teach him something. We should not chalk up the vision to Peter being "a bit too hungry" or "cannot get his mind off of food."

D. Is the sheet a picnic blanket? I don't know about that, but the point is what was on the sheet, which was: all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. Peter saw them as alive because God told Peter to kill them and eat them.

1. The following animals were forbidden in the OT law: camel, rock badger, hare, pig; if it lived in the water but did not have fins or

scales; and the eagle, vulture, buzzard, stork, heron, hoopoe, bat, various owls, ostrich, etc. See Leviticus 11 for details.

2. Evidently all these and more were on the sheet let down from heaven for Peter to eat. We know based on his response that these animals were not all clean. Maybe all were unclean varieties. Even if some were clean, they would be functionally unclean since they were all bundled up with unclean animals.

E. God told Peter in the vision to kill whatever he wanted on there and to eat it.

F. Peter objected that he had never eaten anything common or unclean. He had been an observant Jew all his life.

1. What is common? Opposite of sanctified or “set apart”, ceremonially unclean. See Mark 7:2, 5 on the idea of “defiled” in terms of the Pharisaical “unwashed hands tradition.”
2. What is unclean? Opposite of ceremonially clean. Something unclean could not be touched lest its uncleanness be transmitted. Hag 2:13.

G. God responded that he had cleansed those things, so they were not to be called common (and, we understand, unclean is implied as well). This means that God *declared* or made clean the animals that were on the sheet, including the ones that were formerly unclean.

The issue in the Old Testament law about food was not a health issue, although avoiding certain animals certainly could be healthy (like not messing around with BATS). The issue was separation from the surrounding nations and being set apart to God. Those nations ate those foods; Jews were to fastidiously avoid them so as to keep a boundary of separation between themselves and the pagans. The food that the pagans ate reminded the Jewish believer that those folks were unclean. In other words, what I am saying is that there was an close connection between the food and the people who ate the food.

H. The fact that the vision was repeated two more times for a total of three times is significant.

1. It means that the vision was important and certain, and God strongly meant what he was saying. Compare to Joseph’s statement in Genesis 41:32. Daniel said that another dream—the one in chapter 2—had a certain and sure interpretation (2:45). We are not told there that it was repeated, but 2:1 did say “dreams” so perhaps it was a repeated dream. In any case, God repeated the matter

because the thing is established by God. Peter's vision is certain and its interpretation is sure.

2. It may be significant that *three* men were coming to see Peter, so God repeated the vision three times.
3. It is also significant because this matter was very difficult for Peter. Remember, the Lord had previewed in his earthly teaching that it was not unwashed hands that made someone unclean, or what went into the mouth, but what came out of the heart. Later on Peter had an issue with the whole food thing—Gal. 2:12. The early church had a debate about whether Gentiles had to follow the Law to be saved (Acts 15).

I. In terms of Christian theology, the heavenly disclosure means this: **Food laws are set aside**. See Mark 7:19-20. Col. 2:16; 2:21, 1 Timothy 4:3, Romans 14:1-12, esp. v. 14 (nothing impure=common). Food laws were never laid upon Gentiles in the first place; and now the laws are not incumbent upon Christians, nor Jews who become Christians, nor Jews at all since the dawn of the church age.

J. What is not called out explicitly here is called out later—that it was not just the food that was the issue, but **the PEOPLE who ate the food**. If the food was unclean, then the people who ate it were unclean too. But if the food was cleansed, that is, not ceremonially defiling anymore, then so were the people that ate it. See 10:28-29, as well as 11:2-3. This freed Peter to ...

1. Share table fellowship with people who ate this kind of food;
2. Minister to those people who ate the food;
3. Understand that they too could be part of the church.

## II. The Summons for Peter to Come to Caesarea, v. 17-23

A. The timing of the vision was perfect. The men from Cornelius came just after the vision was done and Peter was thinking about it. God does things like that.

B. Verses 17 and 19 say that Peter was perplexed and thinking about what he saw. This is understandable, because a MAJOR change in God's dealings with men had happened before his very eyes. This is why we explain that Acts is a transitional book in Biblical history. Directives from the prior dispensation are being set aside or modified during the course of the early years of the church as the transition to the new dispensation of the church is completed.

- C. The Spirit of God guided Peter about the three men and said that he should go without any delay or doubt.
- D. Peter inquires why they have come. The men explained about Cornelius. They described him as a just man, fearing God, and with good reputation among the Jews. Review what we learned about him in 10:1-8.
- E. They told of the angel who instructed him to send for Peter. It was obviously their understanding that Peter would come as a messenger to tell them something. There was nothing else that would suffice.
- F. It was past mealtime by now, the main meal was probably ready, so Peter invited them in. Probably he had to gather a few things for the travel, and the next day off they went.
- G. Some other believers went along. These would serve as witnesses to the what was going to happen—the salvation of Cornelius and the other Gentiles, and the coming of the Holy Spirit.
- H. For Peter to even go with these men was a big step. He was entering into a level of fellowship with Gentiles. They would be assumed to be pagan idolaters, eating unclean food much of the time. This would get him into trouble with his Jewish compatriots (Acts 11:1).

### **Question of Interpretation**

- A. When I spoke on this passage 11 years ago in 2013, A question arose from the audience as to the interpretation of the vision. The substance of the question seemed to be this: does the vision really mean food, or does it just refer to men? In other words, since Peter explains what God showed him (10:28), and his explanation had to do with men not being common or unclean, then is that the “real meaning” of the vision?
- B. My answer is that God did cleanse the food/animals, and by so doing, also cleansed something more important—the people who were characterized by eating that food. They are not to be considered unclean just because of their food consumption. In fact, they are not to be considered unclean at all. Whether we understand it or not, it is clear that *Peter* did understand because he said in v. 28 “God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.” The Spirit of God told Peter what to do about these three men—go with them, do not doubt. There is no question what the meaning of it all is. If God cleanses animals, then it is no stretch at all to see that He has done the same with people. Is it *animals* that God is concerned about (1 Cor. 9:9)? These people would be fully cleansed by the gospel of Christ.

- C. To sample a commentary, note Kent, *Jerusalem to Rome...*, p. 91-92: “On the surface [the vision] seemed to mean that the Mosaic laws of ritual cleanliness were no longer to be observed. But was this all that was implied?...By instructing Peter to go with [the three gentiles], the Holy Spirit enabled Peter to draw his own conclusion about these gentiles...If the food laws of the Jews no longer were valid, there was no real reason to avoid social contact with gentiles, for those distinctions lay at the heart of Jewish clannishness.”
- D. Another commentary: Ryrie, *Acts of the Apostles* in Everyman’s Bible Commentary, p. 62: “He was pondering the meaning of the vision, which was simply that unclean Gentiles were now to be cleansed by the Gospel of Christ and brought into the Church on the same basis as Jewish believers.” MAP: It doesn’t seem so simple...the gospel is definitely involved, but I’m thinking that this clean/unclean issue was resolved *prior* to Peter even going.
- E. MacArthur in his Study Bible suggests that the clean animals represent Jews and the unclean represent Gentiles. So it was “more than just abolishing the OT dietary restrictions, God made unity possible in the church of both Jews, symbolized by the clean animals, and Gentiles, symbolized by the unclean animals, through the comprehensive sacrificial death of Christ...” MAP: the likeness is reading a bit too much into it, but it gets to the right answer.
- F. Polhill, NAC commentary on Acts, p. 255: “Some scholars feel that Peter’s vision dealt more with food laws than with interaction with Gentiles. This is to overlook the fact that the two are inextricably related. In Lev 20:24b-26 the laws of clean and unclean are linked precisely to Israel’s separation from the rest of the nations. The Jewish food laws presented a real problem for Jewish Christians in the outreach to the Gentiles. One simply could not dine in a Gentile’s home without inevitably transgressing those laws either by the consumption of unclean flesh or of flesh that had not been prepared in a kosher, i.e., ritually proper, fashion (cf. Acts 15:20). Jesus dealt with the problem of clean and unclean, insisting that external things like foods did not defile a person but the internals of heart and speech and thought render one truly unclean (Mark 7:14-23). In Mark 7:19b Mark added the parenthetical comment that Jesus’ saying ultimately declared all foods clean. This was precisely the point of Peter’s vision: God declared the unclean to be clean. In Mark 7 Jesus’ teaching on clean/unclean was immediately followed by his ministry to a Gentile woman (7:24-30), just as Peter’s vision regarding clean and unclean foods was followed by *his* witness to a Gentile. It is

simply not possible to fully accept someone with whom you are unwilling to share in the intimacy of table fellowship. The early church had to solve the problem of kosher food laws in order to launch a mission to the Gentiles. Purity distinctions and human discrimination are of a single piece.”

MAP