

## Honour God in All Things

HN 22/01/06pm

Reading: Deuteronomy 14, Mark 7:1-30

Study Text: Deuteronomy 14:1-21

Sing Psalms: 25:1-5, 25:6-10, 15, 71:1-3

Moses told the people they were a holy people, holy children of a holy God. They must demonstrate this truth through holy living, through trusting in the Lord and obeying his commands. *Be holy because I am holy* (Leviticus 11:44). The Lord promised to bless all the work of their hands when they honoured him in their lives. *Those who honour me I will honour* the Lord said to Eli the priest when his sons were *kicking at my sacrifices* (1 Samuel 2:29-30).

The second commandment states 'you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain'. In other words you must honour and revere the Lord, not only in what you say but in all that you do. You must not say or do anything that would bring dishonour to the name of your heavenly Father, for you are his people, his special treasure.

The people of God were not to adopt the lifestyle of the original inhabitants of this land nor of the people in surrounding nations. The Canaanites are not mentioned by name in this chapter but this is the background to understanding the instructions given here. The word 'detestable/abominable' – *you shall not eat any detestable thing* (14:3) – is a term linked with practices in Canaanite religious life which are not tolerated by the Lord (7:25, 26; 12:31; 13:14).

In this chapter Moses details three areas of life in which the people were to demonstrate such holiness or separateness as the unique people of God: mourning, eating and tithing (only deal with first two today).

### Mourning Rites

If a colleague turned up for work with his head shaven it was highly likely that there had been a death in his family. In India men shaved their heads as a sign of mourning. The shaved hair was like an offering for the dead. In many religions, including probably that practiced by the Canaanites, shaving of the head is done as a sign of mourning the dead.

The other thing which the Canaanites did to honour the dead was cut themselves. This was not so much self-mutilation for its own sake – even though such cutting, tattooing and piercing was prohibited (Leviticus 19:28). It was done for the dead and it seems the blood, as with the hair, was offered to the dead. Such 'bodily offerings' can be made because blood is replenished by the body, and hair re-grows.

To offer another part of the body would be difficult, although it is recorded that 'in New Guinea a mourner, especially a woman, will remove a joint of a finger, and in extreme cases more than one finger joint'. Of course in India a mourning widow may throw herself on the burning funeral pyre of her husband in the abominable practice called Sati.

Thankfully we do not see such pagan mourning practices in our land as yet – but they are coming. The Lord told his people not to do such things in honour of the dead. They were holy people. They were not to mourn as the pagans do, not to mourn as those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). They were not to engage in rituals that could lead to ancestor worship.

## Clean and Unclean Creatures

*You shall not eat any detestable thing* (14:3). Why did the Lord put restrictions on what living things his people could eat? After the flood God told Noah *every moving thing that lives shall be food for you* (Genesis 9:3). My friends in Nagaland took these words quite literally. They ate frogs and dogs, birds and monkeys and anything else that moved.

But when the Lord brought his chosen people out of Egypt he commanded them not to eat certain animals. Why? Noah was allowed to eat anything, and Jesus later declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19). Note also that the foreigner living among them was not bound by these rules.

Reasons suggested for these distinctions between clean and unclean animals include:

Hygiene: Detailed health studies have shown the danger from disease of eating many of these unclean animals. By and large the clean animals are domestic herbivores – here in Deuteronomy some wild herbivores are also included (*cf* Leviticus 11). Such animals are characterised as having cloven hooves and chewing the cud.

The pig was a notable exclusion, being an animal that does not chew the cud. Pigs will eat anything, including refuse and faeces. They are renowned for carrying the dreaded tape worm (trichinosis) which can be passed on to humans in meat that is not fully cooked. It has been suggested that the hare and the coney were also disease carriers. But why was the camel unclean?

Among the sea creatures, fish were clean but not things without fins or scales – so no eels, prawns or oysters. We are familiar with the dangers of eating oysters from contaminated waters. Remember the hepatitis A scare with oysters from Myall lakes – but fish were not affected. With the birds it is difficult to identify some of the species named in Scripture, but again it was largely a case of the flesh-eaters being declared unclean. For the bat however another reason must be found. Insects were unclean – with some exceptions (Leviticus 11:20f).

The label ‘unclean’ suggests animals that carry disease or make a person sick in some way. But this does not account for all prohibited animals. Spiritual or religious uncleanness it seems is another reason.

Religion: I was driving with a Christian friend one night in India when he suddenly jammed on the brakes and started reversing up the road. Eventually in the headlights I saw a rabbit dead on the road. My friend had noticed this while driving along. He quickly jumped out of the car and was excited to find the rabbit still warm. It must have been hit by another car just ahead of us. He gathered the carcass and when we got into town went to his friends place to cook the rabbit for breakfast. I was not eager to join them for breakfast!

Moses did not permit such an animal to be eaten by the people of God. Not only was the rabbit itself unclean, but being found already dead, it was not to be eaten (14:21). Why? Why was anything found dead not to be eaten – or even touched? And why was it okay for foreigners to eat such an animal? The reason was not simply hygiene.

Remember that when slaughtering an animal the people of God had to pour the blood out on the earth – they were not to eat blood for the life is in the blood (12:24). An animal found dead may still have blood in it. The alien was not bound by this religious rule like the *holy people of the Lord*.

*You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk* (14:21). This prohibition gave rise to the Jewish food law that milk and meat must not be eaten together. Why was this practice prohibited? The reason was religious. The Canaanites and others apparently did this as a religious ritual or magical spell. Hence the people of God must have nothing to do with such a practice. Flee from idolatry. The holy people of God must separate themselves from any ritual or religious practice performed by the pagans around them.

This may well have been the case with the bat which was treated with superstition by some. The ibis and certain fish were venerated in Egypt. Even the pig was used in pagan cultic practices in the ancient Near East among Hittites and Greeks.

Whatever the reason(s) they were given, these rules regarding clean and unclean animals would have had the effect of separating the people of God from pagans, and preserving them as the holy people of God. It was not that eating or not eating certain foods *per se* made them holy. The Lord chose them and he made them holy. There were to demonstrate this holiness by honouring and obeying the Lord.

At the time of Jesus the Jews were still keeping these food laws. In fact the Pharisees were keeping them with vigour, believing that by doing so they would be made holy. They condemned the disciples of Jesus for eating with unwashed hands, and for eating with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 7, Luke 5). Jesus sought to correct their misunderstanding of these laws. He said *there is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile a man* (Mark 7:15). Jesus declared all foods clean.

Jesus, like Moses, was concerned about defilement. But Jesus came to deal with defilement at its source – the heart of man. It is not what goes into a man that defiles him but what comes out of his heart. *The kingdom of God* said the apostle Paul *is not about eating and drinking but righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit* (Romans 14:17). Those who believe in Jesus receive a new heart. They are given the Holy Spirit, they walk in the Spirit and are led by the Spirit.

Beware of those who seek to establish righteousness by the keeping of food laws – or any laws. Paul preached against such people (Colossians 2:16; I Timothy 4:3), so clearly they were prevalent in his day. And such people and such teaching are still prevalent today, even among Christians.

Paul was convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself (Romans 14:14). *Every creature of God is good and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving* (I Timothy 4:4). This is not to say that it would be wise, for health reasons, to stay away from certain foods. But apart from sin against the weaker brother (Romans 14), there is no longer a command or spiritual reason for not eating any food.

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