

The Case for Torah

A Study of Matthew Chapter 15 and
Mark Chapter 7

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When it comes to what is allowed on our dinner plates, many turn to Matthew 15 and Mark 7. In these sister passages, Jesus argues with the Pharisees about what defiles a person – unwashed hands or a defiled heart. In this encounter, Jesus declares all foods clean. Let's take a look at the situation to see if pork chops and crispy strips of fried bacon can now be added to the menu.

Both of these passages record the same event.

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.”
(Matthew 15:1–2)

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (Mark 7:1–5)

The Pharisees and the scribes ask Jesus why he lets his disciples eat without first washing their hands. This behavior is in violation of the "tradition of the elders." Mark adds some more information than Matthew about these traditions for washing, which include washing hands and other objects, depending on the situation. Most scholars believe Mark was writing to a Gentile audience who therefore may not be familiar with the Jewish traditions (Edwards, 10). But what are these "traditions"? Are they biblical traditions according to the Law of Moses or something else?

Traditions of Man

There is nothing mentioned in the Law (the first five books of the Bible) concerning the washing of hands before eating. While this might be good hygiene, it is not a command from God (although priests are required to wash prior to offering sacrifices in Exodus 30:18-21 and 40:30-32). There are instructions in the Law concerning the washing of dishes if they become unclean through contact with a dead animal (Leviticus 11:32) but nothing about washing of hands.

So then, what is the "tradition of the elders" the Pharisees are referring to? Description of hand-washing among Jews and its significance in the first century is lacking, although we know from passages such as these in Matthew and Mark that hand-washing had ritual significance at this time. About 200 years after Christ, the Jews had more fully developed these rules, or “traditions” concerning

washing hands before eating. These can be found in the Talmud in the tractate Yadayim. Yet in the first century, Jewish traditions about washing hands were already present. Jesus argues these traditions are not from God but from man; moreover, traditions have wrongly taken the place of God's commands found in the Torah.

He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." (Matthew 15:3-9).

And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God)-- then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do." (Mark 7:6-13).

Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for setting aside the Law of Moses for the sake of holding onto traditions. Here, he uses the example of the fifth commandment, to honor one's father and mother. While it may seem foreign to our modern American culture, keeping the fifth commandment meant more than just respecting one's parents with our words. Honor was played out through action. Specifically, adult children honored their parents by providing for them financially in their old age, when they were no longer able to do the physical work necessary to make income in their agrarian society. Yet during the first century, Jews were given allowance to ignore this responsibility by saying the money they would have given to their parents is dedicated instead to God as a gift to the temple.

No one questions the importance of this law in the Ten Commandments; disregarding it was punishable by death in ancient Israel. Part of honoring father and mother is to care for them, both financially and personally, in their old age. However, Jewish tradition allowed that funds originally dedicated to the care of parents could be declared Corban (Hebrew/Aramaic for legally "dedicated to God"; cf Lev. 1:2; 2:1 etc.), meaning that the person would no longer be required to do anything for...father or mother. These funds could now be given to the temple, if so desired. Such human traditions thus allow room for the

depravity of the human heart, directly opposing the Law of Moses which so often serves to protect the weak and helpless, in this case, parents in their feeble old age (making void the word of God). The “Corban” tradition is an example (along with many such things you do) of disregarding and rejecting the most important parts of the Mosaic law (ESV Study Bible, page 1906).

This is a clear example of a manmade tradition that not only is not from the Law, but that actually opposes the Law. Jesus calls his audience on this, saying that their traditions make void the word of God. This is a stinging rebuke! The Pharisees want to guard traditions of the elders—rules of mere men—while flagrantly ignoring one of the ten commandments, to honor your father and your mother.

Understanding "Defiled"

In Mark 7:2, the Pharisees saw that Jesus’ disciples ate with defiled hands – that is, hands that were unwashed. The Greek word for defiled here is κοινός (*koinos*), which usually means common. For example, it is used in Acts 2:44 and 4:32 to describe believers in the early church, who had all things in common. Again, it is used in Titus 1:4 and Jude 3 to describe our common faith/salvation. Interestingly, *koinos* is where we get the English word for “coin” because the coin is our common currency.

While it means common, it sometimes can be translated “defiled” such as here in Mark (cf. Romans 14:14), and denotes some kind of ritual or ceremonial impurity, likely based on manmade rules, as is the case in Mark. In fact, Mark clarifies that the defilement comes from unwashed hands, which we have seen is not a command from God but from the traditions of man.

Koinos is used throughout the text, whenever we see “defiled” in both Matthew and Mark, which is the appropriate word choice since Jesus is addressing manmade ceremonial rituals and traditions. There is a different word in the Greek that corresponds to the Hebrew “unclean” used to describe animals that were not permitted to be eaten in Leviticus 11. That word is ἀκάθαρτος (*akathartos*) and is used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament used at the time of Christ) in places such as Leviticus 11. If Jesus had been addressing unclean animals as described in the law, then Matthew or Mark would likely have chosen to use that word so that the audience would recognize Leviticus 11 language.

The Condition of the Heart

Jesus continues his teaching about hand-washing, a commandment of men:

And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person” (Matthew 15:10-11).

And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and

understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him” (Mark 7:14-15).

Recall the Pharisaical accusation against the disciples: they ate with defiled hands, which led to defiled food. Jesus turns the table on the Pharisees, showing that they are the ones who are truly defiled. Unwashed hands cannot defile a person’s inner being, but what proceeds from the heart is what defiles. The Pharisees are hypocrites who pay lip-service but have hearts far from God (Matthew 15:7-9; Mark 7:6). They are the ones who are unclean, for their hearts are unclean.

This direct attack offended the Pharisees:

Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit” (Matthew 15:12-15).

Jesus is not interested in placating the Pharisees; he states they are not of the Father (i.e. he has not planted them) and are blind guides. While the Pharisees claim Jesus’ disciples were defiled because they did not wash their hands in the prescribed manner, Jesus asserts the defilement of the Pharisees is far more serious.

The disciples want more clarification. Jesus, marveling at their lack of understanding, explains further:

But Peter said to him, “Explain the parable to us.” And he said, “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone” (Matthew 15:15-20).

And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:17-23).

Jesus explains it is not food that goes into the body that defiles. Food simply goes through the digestive tract and is expelled, but cannot enter a man’s inner heart. Rather, a person is defiled from the state of his or her own wicked heart. The Pharisees believed they were clean because they followed manmade ritualistic traditions such as ceremonial hand-washing. Jesus exposes their unclean hearts.

All Foods Clean?

Traditional explanations of these passages conclude that Jesus overrides and abolishes the Old Testament food laws detailed in Leviticus 11 and other passages. The basis of this conclusion is, if what enters our mouth cannot defile our hearts, then any previous description of clean and unclean animals must no longer apply. Even though the immediate context is about manmade laws and not the commands given by God in the Torah, some scholars conclude that Jesus has the Old Testament food laws in mind. R.T. France, a scholar on Mark's gospel, makes this conclusion:

The force of this pronouncement cannot easily be confined to the issue of hand washing with which the pericope began. While the washing ritual (where recognised) did indeed involve the impurity of food eaten without due preparation, this was only a very minor aspect of the concept of defilement by 'what goes in'. Far more prominent were the very detailed regulations of Lv. 11 specifying which animals could and could not be eaten by the people of God, spelled out in terms of 'clean' and 'unclean' foods, and the prohibition of eating blood first declared in Gn. 9:4 and developed in Lv. 17. It was such laws, firmly rooted in the Torah, that would more naturally come to a Jewish mind on hearing Jesus' words (289-290).

Even though the context is about hand washing, France maintains that the Jewish mind would naturally apply Jesus' words to the Old Testament food laws. However, France must step outside of the context to arrive at this conclusion. There is nothing mentioned in the passage about negating the food laws found in the Torah. Rather, Jesus upholds the Torah and speaks against the traditions of men (Matthew 15:3-9; Mark 8:8-13). (Interestingly, France uses the prohibition of eating blood as an example of the Old Testament regulations that Jesus is apparently abrogating, yet even the Gentile believers in the early church are told to refrain from eating blood in Acts 15:19-20.)

If Jesus were abrogating the food laws in this passage, he would negate the argument that he had just given about honoring one's parents. Remember that Jesus has criticized the Pharisees' manmade traditions because these traditions cause the people to break the commands of God found in the Torah. They teach that people can dishonor their parents (command of God) by giving the money set aside for their parents to the temple (command of man). Jesus upholds God's commands rather than abrogate his commands. He would no sooner negate the food laws than say we can dishonor our parents. Rather, what Jesus is attacking is the traditions of man, especially those that stand against God's law.

William L. Lane, a commentator on the book of Mark, admits that Jesus is not speaking about the OT food laws in this passage, at least through verse 19a:

Here, however, Jesus' expression is general and enigmatic. It did not abrogate the Mosaic laws on purification or erase the distinctions between clean and unclean and declare them invalid. It rather attacked the delusion that sinful men can attain to true purity before God

through the scrupulous observance of cultic purity which is powerless to cleanse the defilement of the heart. It is this latter emphasis which is stressed in the exposition to the disciples in verses 17–19a (254.)

Lane further states,

Jesus now makes this explicit when he traces the source of defilement to the heart, and shows that in an ultimate sense “food” and “the heart” have nothing to do with each other. The relevance of this explanation to the question posed in verse 5 is apparent: fulfilling the dictates of the oral law on cultic purity does not alter the heart of man with its warring impulses: the minutiae of the tradition are powerless to remove the pollution from the heart, the source of defilement in the actions of men. Jesus has no intention of denying that the purity laws occupy a significant place in the Mosaic code (Lev. 11:1–47; Deut. 14:1–20) or of detracting from the dignity of men who suffered death rather than violate the Law of God governing unclean foods (1 Macc. 1:62 f.). Rather he presses home the recognition that the ultimate seat of purity or defilement before God is the heart (255).

Lane recognizes Jesus is not undoing the food laws in the Torah, but is focusing on the essential and primary need for internal purity, in the heart.

Contextually, the issue at hand is two-fold: 1) The Pharisees were elevating their own manmade traditions over the Word of God; and 2) while the Pharisees thought that following these traditions brought purity, Jesus shows that defilement comes from the wickedness of the heart (even if your hands are washed!).

Referring to 7:15, “There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him,” Markan scholar Robert A. Guelich comments,

It becomes obvious that that community in no way understood Jesus’ “original” response in 7:15 to be in reference to the Levitical food laws. In fact, it was precisely the Pharisees’ use of “tradition” to contravene the Mosaic law that made them “hypocrites.” So one could evidently still take seriously 7:15, buttressed by the argument in 7:6–13, in the narrow terms of “defiled hands” and follow the Levitical food laws. This seems to have been how 7:15 was preserved in its present form in the primitive Church (376).

Lane, Guelich, and others agree Jesus is not addressing the Old Testament food laws, at least through verse 19a. Yet many of these same scholars still eventually conclude New Testament believers are set free from these laws, based on the Matthew and Mark passages. This is primarily due to the second half of Mark 7:19.

And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) (Mark 7:18–19).

Many modern translations (including the ESV quoted above) put the second half of verse 19 in parentheses and interpret it as a comment by Mark, who is explaining the meaning of Jesus' teaching. However, not all translations read this way. Consider the following:

And he saith unto them, Are ye so without understanding also? Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, *it* cannot defile him; Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, **purging all meats?** (Mark 7:18–19 King James Version, emphasis ours).

So He said to them, “Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, *thus* purifying all foods?” (Mark 7:18–19 New King James Version).

In these translations, the parenthetical comment asserting Jesus declared all foods clean is absent. Instead, the cleansing or purifying of foods is done by the digestive system, as the food is eliminated from the body. This understanding makes logical sense and fits the context. Jesus is describing how food goes into the body, through the stomach, and then is expelled. When food is expelled, the body is cleansed of the food.

Some may ask what is meant by “all foods” or “all meats”? Would this include foods listed as unclean in the Torah, such as pork and shellfish? The context does not allow for this interpretation on two levels. First, Jesus is giving the example of how the digestive system expels food that we eat. Yet the stomach and intestines cannot turn pork from unclean to clean. What it can do is get rid of waste that we do not need. When God told the Israelites not to eat certain animals, He knew about the digestive process (which He created Himself.) If it somehow had sanctifying power to transform an unclean animal into clean food for us, then there would be no need for Him to have given the food commandments in the first place.

Second, Jesus' audience was Jewish, and because of this, had clear definitions of what is food and what is not food. When Jesus said, “cleansing all meats,” they would not think of pork or rabbit or spiders. They would think of lamb and beef and dove. Contextually, Jesus is describing the cleansing digestive process of biblically-clean foods, and pointing out the body's lack of power to cleanse the heart.

If some translations such as KJV and NKJV read this way, why then do other translations include a statement about Jesus declaring all foods clean? The tension lies in the Greek. Verse 19 reads:

ὅτι οὐκ εἰσπορεύεται αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ἀλλ' εἰς τὴν κοιλίαν, καὶ εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκπορεύεται, **καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα** (hoti ouk eisporouetai autou eis tēn kardian all' eis tēn koilian, kai eis ton aphedrōna ekporouetai, **katharizōn panta ta brōmata**) (emphasis ours).

The phrase in question is “καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα” (*katharizōn panta ta brōmata*). This phrase literally means, “cleansing all foods.” The difficulty arises with the Greek verb καθαρίζω (*katharizō*; in our text, the form being *katharizōn*).

There is a textual variant with this word, which means the Greek manuscripts have differences in wording. The King James Version (and NKJV) was translated from the Textus Receptus, which is the Greek New Testament text originally compiled by Erasmus in 1535 and based on manuscripts dating no earlier than the tenth century (Wegner, 219, 339). Later manuscripts such as those used to compile the Textus Receptus have one form of the verb *katharizō*, where as the ESV, NASB, and other versions use older and generally more reliable manuscripts. These older manuscripts have a different form of the verb *katharizō*.

Tricky Grammar

Now it’s time for a bit of a grammar lesson. In many languages, including Greek, verbs have gender (masculine, feminine, or neuter), number (singular or plural), and case (nominative, accusative, etc.). The gender, number, and case of the verb match the gender, number, and case of its subject. Let’s consider an example in English to help us understand what is going on here. Here is a simple English sentence:

He runs.

In this example, the subject is “he.” It is the subject because it is the person or thing doing the action. Therefore, the case is nominative (which means subject). “He” has a gender, which is masculine, and “he” is singular since there is only one person doing the action.

In summary, “he” has the following attributes:

Case: Nominative

Gender: Masculine

Number: Singular

The verb of the sentence is “runs.” In English, this is a bit tricky because, while our verbs can be described in many ways, they don’t really have case or gender. Singular third person verbs (such as those that accompany “he”) do have number. We have to say “He runs,” not “He run.” An “-s” is required at the end of the verb to show that it is a third person singular verb. But case and gender are lacking in our English verbs.

“Runs,” therefore, has the following attributes:

Case: none

Gender: none

Number: singular

Concerning case, in English there is not a special ending on the verb “runs” to indicate that it is nominative. The same is true of gender. There is nothing special about “runs” to tell us that the person running is a male. But in Greek, there are forms of the verb to indicate both of these things. We could look at the Greek verb for “runs” in isolation, apart from its subject, and be able to tell that it is a nominative, masculine verb, and that it therefore has a nominative, masculine subject.

I am a lover of grammar. I get excited to see the intricacies of language at work. Perhaps you are like me, or perhaps you are less enthused about parts of speech and subject-verb agreement. Whatever the case, grammar is critical to understanding language. More significantly, it is critical to understanding God’s Word. With this in mind, let’s return to Mark 7:19b.

In later dated manuscripts, the verb *katharizō* is written as a **neuter** singular nominative participle (a participle is a verb form that can act like an adjective or adverb). But in the older manuscripts, *katharizō* is a **masculine** singular nominative participle. Why does this matter? Because it signifies whether the subject (the person or thing doing the action) is neuter or masculine. If it is neuter, then the thing doing the action of “cleansing” would be something like the neutral “body,” or perhaps the process of digestion, which is eliminating the waste. The food goes through the body. The body eliminates it. Food is thus cleansed from the body.

In the older manuscripts, since *katharizō* is a **masculine** singular nominative participle, it should have a masculine singular nominative noun paired with it. The closest one in the text is Jesus himself, in verse 18, where it says “He said” (referring to Jesus). Therefore, many modern translations conclude that Jesus is the one cleansing the food. Yet this seems inconsistent with the context. Jesus is not talking about himself doing any sort of cleansing, but rather food going through the body. And so, the modern translators conclude that Mark is making a parenthetical comment, explaining that through this teaching, Jesus is declaring that all foods are now clean to eat.

Critical Questions

This grammar raises several questions:

First, what is the most natural, contextual reading of the passage?

Second, which are the more reliable Greek manuscripts?

Third, if the older manuscripts are more reliable, is it possible in the Greek to have a verb or participle that does not match its subject in gender, number, or case?

Fourth, should we discard the food laws based on this passage with debatable translation and application?

A key principal of hermeneutics (the study of how to interpret Scripture) is to consider the context of the passage. The overall context of the passage is the elevation of manmade traditions over the Word of

God. Specifically, Jesus addresses the Pharisaical tradition of hand-washing to prevent food from becoming unclean. Jesus points out the absurdity of this teaching because food eaten with unwashed hands cannot go into your body and make your heart unclean. Rather, it is what comes out of a person, from their already defiled heart that shows they are truly unclean.

Based on this context, it is inconsistent to conclude the enigmatic verse of 19b as a statement about abrogating the Biblical food laws, which are not mentioned in the passage. Jesus is addressing manmade laws, not God's laws. Rather, it makes more sense to render the passage, "cleansing all foods," referring to the body's ability to rid itself of anything it consumes through the process of digestion.

This explanation is incomplete without answering the second question: Which are the more reliable Greek manuscripts?

The KJV and NKJV translations, though they may make the most sense in the context, are based on the Textus Receptus, which contains the neuter participle for "cleansing." The Textus Receptus is generally less reliable than other older manuscripts because it is based on manuscripts that date no earlier than the tenth century. There are several additional manuscripts from the ninth century that also include the neuter participle in Mark 7:19 (such as Codex Cyprius). The more modern translations such as the ESV (which include the masculine participle for "cleansing") are based on much older manuscripts such as Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, which are from the fourth century. For this reason, when there is a difference in text, translators lean toward the older manuscripts. *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark* explains,

It is conceded by nearly all commentators and translators that this verbal clause is an additional comment by the evangelist himself, explaining the significance of the words of Jesus (cf. *Field Notes*, 31f. and commentaries *in loc.*). In the correct text the masculine participle *katharizōn* 'cleansing' modifies 'he' (i.e. Jesus), and is a participle of manner, 'In this way he cleansed' (paragraph 10333).

This apparent contradiction produces a bit of a conundrum. The context fits the neuter participle in the later manuscripts, but the masculine participle from the earlier manuscripts is considered more accurate and reliable.

On to the third question, if the older manuscripts are more reliable, is it possible in the Greek to have a verb/participle that does not match its subject in gender, number, or case?

There are, in fact, a number of verses in the New Testament in which participles do not match the subject in gender, number, and/or case. Consider a few different verses where this occurs.

Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, *beginning from Jerusalem*. You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:45–48).

The last participle in this passage is “beginning,” which is the Greek participle ἀρχάμενοι (*arxamenoî*). This participle is masculine plural nominative, yet it has no matching subject that is masculine plural nominative. For this reason, it is unclear whether “beginning from Jerusalem” is modifying what comes before it (the proclamation of repentance for the forgiveness of sins) or what follows it (that the disciples are witnesses beginning from Jerusalem). In either case, the participle lacks a matching subject.

Lukan expert I. Howard Marshall comments, “In both cases the syntax is harsh, and suggests that Luke had not wholly mastered and revised his material. The difficulty led to textual emendation by scribes” (906). Marshall explains that the Greek grammar does not follow the regular rules of syntax and is difficult to translate. Therefore, scribes of the texts fixed the grammar to follow the rules in later manuscripts. This is quite possibly what happened in Mark 19:b, which explains the variants between the newer manuscripts (ninth century and forward) and the older manuscript families (fourth and fifth centuries). In fact, France claims this is exactly what happened in Mark 7:19b. France explains that the ninth and tenth century scribes made “emendations found in some MSS, representing attempts to ‘correct’ the syntax by those who failed to recognise the nature of the clause” (291).

A similar grammatical inconsistency to that of Luke 24 occurs in Acts 10:37:

As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, *beginning from Galilee* after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him (Acts 10:36–38).

Here the Greek participle *arxamenos* is masculine singular nominative, yet, again, it has no antecedent or subject that matches its gender, number, and case. New Testament Greek Scholar Bruce M. Metzger points out this grammatical anomaly in the earlier manuscripts and explains the scribes would have attempted to improve the grammar by altering the case in later manuscript copies (334).

Consider one more example from the Book of James:

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a *restless evil*, full of deadly poison (James 3:7–8).

In this verse, the adjectival participle “restless evil” (ἀκατάστατον κακόν; *akatastaton kakon*) is neuter singular nominative, yet it appears to modify or describe the noun “tongue,” (γλῶσσαν; *glōssan*) which is feminine singular nominative. This is another example of a participle not matching its subject in gender, just like in Mark 19b.

Examples such as these three from Luke, Acts, and James show that the early manuscripts contain grammatical anomalies in syntax. Occasionally the authors wrote participles that did not match their

subjects in gender, number, or case, much as writers today do not always write with perfect grammar. As Marshall, France, and Metzger point out, the scribes took note of these abnormal uses of Greek grammar and attempted to fix them, resulting in later manuscripts with grammatical phrases that made more sense. This explains why the later manuscripts such as those used to compile the Textus Receptus would have a grammatical construction of “cleansing all foods” that made sense contextually. The scribes most likely fixed the perceived grammatical error in gender.

Earliest manuscripts have:	Explanation:	Scribal Solution:	Edited version of later manuscripts:
katharizōn (καθαρίζων) panta ta brōmata	katharizōn (Καθαρίζων) is a masculine singular participle, and appears to lack an immediate masculine singular subject	Noting this grammatical inconsistency, the medieval scribes changed katharizōn (καθαρίζων) to the neuter participle katharizon (καθαρίζον)	katharizon (καθαρίζον) panta ta brōmata

It is, therefore, possible to understand “cleansing all foods” as modifying the process of digestion, as the context implies. Based on the masculine gender of the earliest manuscripts, many scholars understand “cleansing all foods” to be an act by Jesus (since he is the closest masculine word), in which he declares all foods clean. But the grammar in the earliest manuscripts did not always have participles that matched their subjects or antecedents in gender, number, and case. Mark may have a participle with a missing antecedent as in the Luke and Acts examples, or a participle modifying a noun of different gender as in the case of James.

A final note: It is crucial to remember that when we read an English translation of Scripture, there is inevitably translator interpretation due to a variety of factors. One of these is that the translators have many sets of manuscripts from different time periods to make sense of, and they must do their best to reconcile grammatical variants such as the one listed in the table above. Furthermore, a necessary evil of translating is that much of a language’s particular nuances are lost in order to create an understandable translation. This is further complicated by hundreds of years between the original author’s writing and the translator’s work. We, as readers, are subject not only to the interpretive choices of the contemporary translator, but also to the interpretive choices of the scribes who were copying texts and fixing grammatical inconsistencies during the Middle Ages. Text copying and translation is truly a complicated discipline.

The Greater Argument

After this long explanation regarding participles, case endings, and perhaps Mark’s use of poor grammar, one might ask, “Is this the best argument to prove that Jesus is not declaring that we can eat

pork now?” And the answer is “No.” This was merely to show that many scribes over the years who copied this Greek portion of Mark, as well as many Bible translators, have recognized the grammatical inconsistencies. The issue is not as clear-cut as your English translation might make it seem to be.

Rather, the best argument that Jesus is not changing the dietary commands as laid out in Leviticus 11 is this. If Jesus is confronting the Pharisees for creating traditions that make void the commands of God (his specific example is honoring your parents) and then he closes his argument by making void a command of God (to no longer follow the dietary command), then his whole argument is undermined and undone. If we do not need to follow God’s food laws, why do we need to follow his law to honor our parents? It therefore becomes acceptable to dishonor our parents.

If the grammar raises questions and gives us pause, the context should seal the deal – Jesus upholds God’s commands.

What Should We Do?

Now we can answer our fourth critical question above: Should Christians discard the food laws based on this passage with debatable translation and application?

This is the most practical of the four questions. It asks, what should we do? How should we live? Should we continue to follow the food laws found in the Torah or not? Of course, there are many passages in the Bible to consider to answer this question, but for our purposes here, we are looking narrowly at the Matthew/Mark passages.

Should we disregard the food laws based on Mark 7:19b? Since there is much disagreement, textual variants, and grammatical difficulties in translating this half of one verse, this pesky participial clause is insufficient to draw the conclusion that God has made all animals for mankind to eat. It would be an irresponsible application.

Moreover, returning to the original context of the sister passages in Matthew and Mark, we see it is not about clean and unclean animals. Rather, it is about manmade laws raised above God’s laws, and the condition and defilement of the human heart, which desperately needs to be cleansed.

The grammar of 7:19b should cause us to tread carefully with assuming we can eat whatever we like. But the context of the entire passage should clarify the issue. Jesus cannot both uphold and undermine God’s commands.

What can we conclude? What should we do? Let’s be responsible with the text. Contextually, this passage is not about adding pork chops and strips of bacon to our menu. Rather, Jesus encourages us to consider our own customs and traditions, and examine the state of our hearts. We ought to ask ourselves, what are we elevating above the Word of God? What things do we practice while we ignore

the condition of our own sinful hearts? Above all, we must make sure that our traditions do not cause us to “leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of man” (Mark 7:8). May our hearts be cleansed by Him as we seek to live out His Word.

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