

[Mark 7:1-23](#)

I have known more than one friend who went vegetarian find themselves derailed from their noble intentions by the same stumbling block.

They couldn't face life without bacon. The smell of it sizzling in the pan drove them back to the carnivore world.

I also know friends who are going vegan, because they believe the research that shows the amount of red meat production in the world to be a contributor to climate change.

Neither my friends who are former vegetarians nor those who are currently vegan made their decisions in the light of Jesus' teaching in our passage today that all foods are ritually clean. There is a tiny minority of Christians who believe we should still follow the Old Testament kosher laws on food, but overwhelmingly the Christian Church has taken Jesus' abolition of the kosher laws here as read and we make our ethical decisions about food on other bases.

If that's the case, how is today's reading relevant to us?

The answer is that it has a wide relevance to how we understand the will of God and put it into practice. It helps us guard against living our faith in the sincere but sterile way of the Pharisees and instead in the life-giving way of Jesus.

I have three 'H's for you.¹

Firstly, the *Holy Spirit*.

The Pharisees had the Scriptures, such as were recognised at the time. Jesus had the same Scriptures. But what set them apart?

The Pharisees knew that the Scriptures weren't exhaustive for every single situation you would face in life, and so they made up for that by fencing the Scriptures off with their own traditions which they believed enabled you to be faithful. You heard some of them in the reading. It was a sincere effort to do the right thing, but it wasn't a godly one. It was much like the way we prescribe our own rules for churches and organisations.

But Jesus said these traditions were signs of how far from God they were, not least because the human rules and traditions tended to take over from the Scriptures.

Jesus lived differently. The Son of God lived as a man empowered by the Holy Spirit. As the Son of God, living by the power of the Spirit, he isn't someone who can be contaminated by what is unclean. He doesn't need the precautionary measures against ritual and moral uncleanness that ordinary people needed, according to the Old Testament Scriptures.

For us, the application is simple. The example of Jesus leads us into the New Testament era where all disciples of Jesus receive the Holy Spirit. We don't become divine like him, but we do receive the Spirit when we commit our lives to him.

And it is living by the Spirit that is our answer to hedging every Scripture around with particular rules and regulations of our own making. When we live by the Spirit, who inspired the biblical writers, then we have our way of being faithful to divine teaching.

In his Epistle to the Galatians the Apostle Paul called on believers to keep in step with the Spirit, that is to live by the Spirit and be led by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-18). For the Holy Spirit desires the opposite of sin and will guide us in the spirit of scriptural teaching, having himself inspired those same Scriptures.

So this is our first strategy in seeking the will of God – it is to listen for the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit making sense of the Scriptures to us.

Secondly, *history*.

Just because we believe the Bible is inspired doesn't mean we can read a verse from here, a verse from there and another verse from somewhere else, treating them all the same. There is more to the Bible than that. We don't seek guidance by playing 'Bible Bingo', where we almost randomly select verses and treat them all as having equal weight.

No. We set them in their historical context. We take account of where they fall in the canon of inspired writings to which the church submits. What is the cultural background? What is the historical context?

A good example is to compare two different things in this passage. We have the food laws, which Jesus says are no longer needed ('Thus he declared all foods clean', verse 19), but we have other ethical standards, including sexual behaviour, which certainly come over from the Old Testament, but which he clearly retains. Hence, the way the reading ends:

²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.'

What's the difference? Historical context in the great story of God's salvation that the Bible tells provides us with the answer.

In the case of the food laws, they do not originate at creation, where the first humans are given some simple vegetarian permissions, nor later in Genesis after the Flood where meat-eating is also allowed. They come specifically in the context of how Israel will inhabit the land. I have heard a doctor suggest they may even be specific to what was hygienic at the time, but I am not qualified to judge that.

The sexual laws here, banning fornication and adultery, however, have a much bigger context. They can be traced back not only to the prohibition of adultery in the Ten Commandments but to the earliest teaching about such relationships, way back in the creation stories, in Genesis 2:24, where sexual relations are defined as being between one man and one woman exclusively for life. Furthermore, Jesus and Paul both base their teaching on sexual ethics on that verse.

So history shows us that the food laws were for a particular context which has since passed, but the sexual ethics were for all time.

One of the things we can do when we are faced with difficult biblical teaching is to look for the context of the canon of Scripture, the cultural background, and the historical context. We may need to ask those more learned than ourselves, or to research on the Internet, being careful to keep to reputable websites. But probably many more Christian homes could do with having a one-volume Bible commentary on the bookshelf, and maybe one or two other helpful resources as well.

Two 'H's so far: the Holy Spirit and history.

The **third** is *the heart*.

Jesus is very clear here and in the Sermon on the Mount that it's the inner attitudes which determine the way we live as Christians. What goes on inside our lives determines what comes outside into the world. What we dwell on,

what we love, what we spend our time thinking about will have an effect on our actions.

That's why so much of Scripture is addressed to the inner life of disciples. It's not to keep everything inside and private. It's to recognise that the rôle of Holy Writ is to address those inner attitudes and tune them towards our life with God.

What we cannot do is simply treat the Bible as a collection of rules that regulate human action. That would make it no different from the kinds of laws that Parliament passes and to which the Queen assents. If we treat biblical teaching as just a collection of laws that regulate our behaviour, we will find that it lets us down and that we let God down.

I once heard a Muslim teacher say that this was one area where Muslims and Christians disagreed. Islam, he said, had no time for the question of inner motives and the workings of the heart. It only looked at the outer actions.

Followers of Jesus cannot go down that road. When we read the Bible and seek to hear God speaking to us about our lives through it, one thing we need to do is to ask, how does this form my inner life? How does it impact all my affections and the things I love? As one Christian writer has put it, 'You are what you love.'

If we do that, then we will draw closer to God and that will have the knock-on effect that we live in greater holiness. Let the Scriptures focus on our attitudes of heart and the result will not be that grimy list of sins that Jesus lists at the end of the reading: that is what comes when we focus on the outer rule-keeping without the inner formation of the spirit.

No: allowing the Scriptures to mould our hearts will lead instead to the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

So in **conclusion**, this is how we work with the Scriptures to discover God's will. We listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures and are willing to be led by that same Spirit. We explore the history, including the cultural context and the place in God's great story. And we let the Spirit use the Scriptures to work on our hearts, forming us into the people he wants us to be, rather than just folk who forever struggle and fail to conform to outward regulations.

¹ My inspiration for what follows (but not the three 'H's) comes from Ian Paul's blog post, [Do followers of Jesus obey OT food laws \(Mark 7\)?](#)