



# You Are What You Eat

## *Deciding What's for Dinner*

### BACKGROUND

One of the most distinctive aspects of ancient Israelite, early Judean, and contemporary Jewish cultures is their dietary laws. The most commonly recognized element of “keeping kosher” (i.e., observing these rules) is probably that Jews don’t eat pork. Very few attempts to explain the ancient Israelite dietary laws pay attention to the logic of the biblical texts that form their basis. The explanation given here draws on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, whose thought-provoking analysis provides a launching pad for significant questions about our contemporary dietary habits. Her work highlights two biblical texts as lenses for understanding the dietary laws: Genesis 1:1-31 and Genesis 9:1-5.

In the first creation narrative, God spends the first three days creating light and darkness (Genesis 1:3-5), separating sky above from the waters below (1:6-8), and gathering the waters under the sky into one place so that dry land may appear and bring forth vegetation (1:9-13). In this way three habitats are created—water, sky, earth—which God then populates with water creatures, birds, and land animals, including humans, on the remaining three days of creation (1:14-26). To all these creatures God gives green plants, berries, and seeds for food (1:26-30). At creation, all living beings were intended to subsist on a vegetarian or, more correctly, a vegan diet.

Creation does not unfold, however, as intended. The first human beings, in their desire to be like God, turn away from the creator. In doing so, their relationships with one another, with the creatures, and with the earth itself are broken. The result is increasing violence and bloodshed among God’s creatures (Genesis 3–4). In sorrow, God decides, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air” (Genesis 6:7). Only eight humans and an ark full of animals survive the devastating flood that is unleashed on the earth. After the flood God gives the survivors permission to eat meat but never blood (Genesis 9:1-5).

According to Mary Douglas’s analysis, the dietary laws of Leviticus 11 are designed to ensure that God’s people did not violate the prohibition against consuming blood. Hence humans may eat “clean” animals, specifically:

- land animals that are herbivores, have divided hooves, and chew the cud (11:2-3)
- water creatures that have fins and scales (11:9)
- all non-hunting birds (11:13-19)
- winged insects that leap on the ground such as locusts and grasshoppers (11:21-22)

All blood-eating animals and carrion eaters are declared “unclean” and are forbidden for human consumption. The small creatures that swarm on the earth, in the waters, or in the air (all of whom God called “good” in Genesis 1:31) are also forbidden because they are the victims of predatory, blood-, and carrion-eating animals. It is *sheketz*—an abomination—for humans to also prey on these relatively defenseless creatures.

The saying “you are what you eat” helps us understand the point of these ancient Israelite dietary rules. If you ingest blood or animals that consume blood, you become a predator. If you eat the small swarming creatures of the earth, you are behaving like a predator. Predatory behavior is incompatible with holiness. Ingesting unclean animals thus represents behavior that is the direct opposite of God’s call to imitate divine holiness (Leviticus 11:43-45).

In Leviticus 20:22-26, *sheketz* will result in God setting God’s face against a person and cutting him or her off from the community of God’s holy people (see Leviticus 20:5-6). The prophet Ezekiel warns the Israelites that eating flesh with the blood is one of the sins that will nullify their claim to the land of Israel (Ezekiel 33:25). Eating the wrong food does more than disqualify a person from participating in worship in the Tabernacle or Temple. It constitutes a breach of the covenant relationship between the people and their God.

By the time of Jesus, the biblical dietary regulations were understood to have two enduring benefits: (1) They reminded Judeans not to behave like “unclean” animals—that is, as predators. (2) They were an outward sign of allegiance to God that distinguished them from their polytheistic neighbors.

Jesus taught that what makes people “unclean,” thereby threatening their relationship with God, is not the things they eat but what comes out of their hearts (Mark 7:1-23; Matthew 15:1-20). Paul agreed with members of the Corinthian church that “food will not bring us close to God” (1 Corinthians 8:8). Yet he and the early church continued to struggle with the reality that all meat available for human consumption in the Greco-Roman world came from sacrifices honoring various gods. It was either eaten at the temple as part of fellowship meals or taken home to be part of a family celebration. Leftovers were sold in the marketplace. In the cities in which the early Christians lived, meat was unavoidably connected with polytheism. Eating meat was thus a theological and moral issue in the early church.

Paul’s solution gave church members permission to eat whatever was sold in the marketplace or put in front of them when dining with unbelievers, as long as no one mentioned that it came from a sacrifice (1 Corinthians 8:1-13). Believers could not ever participate in sacrifices or fellowship meals held in pagan temples. For Paul these religious meals were the equivalent of the Lord’s Supper. Just as believers partake of the body and blood of Christ, together becoming one body in Christ, so too participants in pagan temple meals are bound to be “destroyed” by the food sacrificed to idols. You are what you eat!

# GATHER

## Opening Conversation

Supplies: whiteboard with markers

Set up a whiteboard where everyone can see it. In the top left corner, write the number 1. In the top right corner, write the number 10. Down the left side in a column, write: *What we eat, How much we eat, Where food comes from*. Ask students to think about the food they eat and whether it matters what types of food they eat, how much, or where it came from. When they're ready, invite students to grab a marker and make a mark rating how important they think each of these three issues is, with 1 being not important and 10 being very important.

Discussion Questions:

- **What does our group think is important or not important when it comes to food?**
- **What impact do you think what we eat has on the rest of the world?**

## Prayer

Supplies: none

Invite students to stand in a circle and rest one hand on their stomach and the other hand near their mouth. **God, you have provided us with food that is delicious and life-giving. Help us to pay attention to what we eat and make wise choices about how we nourish our bodies. Amen.**

# EXPLORE

## Image

Supplies: calorie-consumption map image from page 80, projector and screen, Student Sheets (optional)

*\*If you don't have a projector and screen, youth can look at the image on the back of their Student Sheets.*

Project the calorie-consumption map image so everyone can see it. Explain that the dark blue shows countries where the most calories are consumed, and the light green shows countries where the fewest calories are consumed. Invite students to look at the image and consider what words, phrases, themes, or questions come to mind. Allow thirty seconds for them to silently reflect. This exercise is intentionally open-ended to allow students to develop unique connections among what they see, hear, and discuss throughout the lesson.

Discussion Questions:

- **What words, phrases, themes, or questions did you think about?**
- **How does this map affect your thoughts about the importance of the questions we considered earlier?**

## Video Clip

Supplies: *Food Inc.* video clip, video source

*\*Be sure to preview the video clip before class.*

Cue the following video clip: *Food Inc.* (2008), 38:50–53:12.

Introduce the two sections of the video that you’re about to watch: “The Dollar Menu” (38:50–44:20) deals with the rising cost of healthy food and explains that a head of broccoli is more expensive than a double cheeseburger. It also notes that the biggest predictor of obesity is income level. “In the Grass” (44:20–53:12) takes a closer look at organic farming vs. food production plants. Note that this clip includes watching chickens/hogs being killed and prepared.

Discussion Questions:

- **What story from the video was the most intriguing?**
- **Why do you eat certain foods and avoid others?**

## The Bridge

Supplies: Student Sheets, pencils, whiteboard with markers

If you haven’t already done so, pass out Student Sheets. Set up a whiteboard where everyone can see it. Ask youth to recall the image and video, then write the first three words that come to mind under My Three Words at the top of the page. When they have finished, invite them to write one or more of their words on the whiteboard.

Read The Gist of the lesson together: **What we eat is a reflection of our relationship with God, creation, and others.** Invite students to draw a symbol next to The Gist representing a relationship between three things.

Discussion Questions:

- **What kinds of foods do you eat, and where do those foods come from?**
- **What do you know about food insecurity issues in our local community? Worldwide?**

## REFLECT

### Scripture Says

Supplies: Student Sheets, pencils, Bibles

Introduce the activity called Habitats and Their Creatures. Read Genesis 1:14-26 together, and invite students to write down what three habitats are named there (water, sky, earth). Have students find a partner and read the three passages from Leviticus, then draw arrows from those passages to the corresponding habitat. Correct responses are:

- EARTH—Leviticus 11:2-3
- WATER—Leviticus 11:9
- SKY—Leviticus 11:13-19

Invite students to read Genesis 1:28-30 on their own and answer the question on the Student Sheet.

Discussion Questions:

- **How are humans called to relate to the earth and its wildlife and plant life?**
- **How has God provided for humans and animals in these verses?**
- **Why are there food laws in the Bible?**

The notion that we are what we eat is deeply embedded in the biblical food laws that forbid eating predatory animals to avoid becoming predators ourselves. The early church accepted that all foods are clean except those served in fellowship meals in pagan temples. To eat at a pagan's table was to become one with the idol that was being worshipped. Even as new understandings of what makes people holy and whole emerge, God's call to be faithful and just in relationship to food remains.

Segue into the activity called Food Laws for Contemporary Christians. Divide students into groups of three or four. Invite them to work together to create four new food laws for twenty-first-century Christians to follow. When everyone is finished, invite small groups to share what they came up with.

Discussion Questions:

- **What new laws did you create?**
- **Why did you create those laws?**
- **What do your new laws say about who God is?**

## Journal Time

Supplies: Student Sheets, pencils, colored pencils

Invite students to flip over their Student Sheets. Read the journaling prompts together: **The new Food Law for Contemporary Christians I think is the most important is... I believe that law is important because... Something from this lesson that I will remember the next time I eat is... Draw your favorite food.** Give students five minutes to respond to the prompts. Invite volunteers to share something they wrote with the group.

## SEND

### Body Map

Supplies: mural-paper Body Map, Body Map Sheets from page 74, black markers, pens

Gather around the mural-paper Body Map. Invite students to work together to draw a circle where the mouth would be. Over it, they should draw a cross with arrows at the end of each line. At the up arrow, write "God"; at the right, write "Creation"; at the left, write

“Others”; on the bottom write “Self.” Ask students to explain why they think each of these aspects is important. As needed, offer suggestions:

- **While our relationship with God does not depend on what we eat, our eating behavior—what we eat, how, when, where, with whom—does reflect our love for God and commitment to be a follower of Jesus.**
- **Everything we eat was either created by God or made from things created by God, so we should receive it with gratitude.**
- **We are entrusted with keeping and tilling the garden that is our planet. Caring for the earth is necessary so that it will continue to produce food for all.**
- **We are not the only people on this planet; our eating habits need to take into consideration not only the people we live with, but also those who don’t have enough to eat.**
- **As stewards of the bodies God has given us, we are responsible for feeding and nourishing ourselves so that we can enjoy good health.**

Pass out Body Map Sheets, and have students add this same drawing to their individual Body Maps.

## **Closing Blessing**

Supplies: Body Map Sheets

Have the students assume a “prayer posture” (e.g., sitting or kneeling with head bowed, standing with hands open, lying face down on the floor), and invite one or more volunteers to read the text of Colossians 3:12-15 from the Body Map Sheet aloud:

**As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.**

Collect Body Map Sheets or remind students to bring their Body Map next time.