

Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 14,

Romans 14:1-15:12

6-min. Video Overview

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So what happens when a community of really sincere people just fundamentally disagrees on the right way to live? It's a problem that feels super modern, right? But it's actually timeless. A guy we know as the Apostle Paul tackled this exact issue head-on in a letter he wrote to a messy multicultural community back in ancient Rome. Now, their big fight was about food and holidays, but the way he told them to handle it? Well, those principles are surprisingly relevant for us today.

Yeah, the core conflict, the thing tearing them apart, was all about diet and holidays. And look, these weren't just small squabbles for them. We're talking about matters of deep personal conviction.

And that really brings up a huge question for any group, doesn't it? When good people, people who mean well, disagree on the rules, what's the way forward? Okay, so to really get what Paul is trying to say, we've got to set the scene in ancient Rome. This community was a real mix of people. You had Jewish members and non-Jewish members, what they called Gentiles.

And of course, each group brought their own deeply ingrained customs, their own, well, cultural baggage to the table. And, you know, while that kind of diversity is amazing, it was also causing some pretty serious sparks to fly. So this conflict basically split the community right down the middle into two main groups.

Paul calls them the strong and the weak. Now, the strong folks, they felt their faith gave them total freedom. They were like, hey, all foods are fine to eat and all days are pretty much the same.

But then you had the weak. They had a more sensitive conscience, and they felt really bound to avoid certain foods and to treat specific holy days as sacred. The key here is that both groups were totally sincere in their beliefs.

But man, they were on a collision course. So how did they respond to this big disagreement? Well, unfortunately, they picked pretty much the worst option possible. Both sides fell right into the trap of judging each other.

They started questioning each other's faith, their motives, the whole shebang. And Paul really drives this point home with a specific Greek word, *krino*. Now, this isn't just about having an opinion.

Krino means to pass sentence, to condemn. It's heavy. And he uses this word over and over again as a really sharp warning, making it crystal clear that when you judge someone on these non-essential things, you're stepping into a role that just doesn't belong to you.

Then Paul uses this really powerful analogy. He asks, who are you to judge someone else's servant? See, in their culture, you just didn't do that. Correcting another person's servant was a huge overstep.

So Paul takes that idea and applies it right to them. He's basically arguing that by judging each other, they're looking at their master, at God, and saying, yeah, I think I know how to run this household better than you do. So after laying out the problem, Paul just completely pivots.

He calls both groups to stop looking down their noses at each other and to start looking up. He wants to shift their whole focus away from their personal rights and opinions and onto a much higher unifying principle. And the crucial point he makes is this.

It's not really what you do that matters most. It's why you do it. Think about it.

If one person eats all foods, they're doing it to honor God. If another person abstains, they are also doing it to honor God. See, when the ultimate motivation is the same, the action itself kind of takes a backseat to that person's sincere conviction.

You know, Paul's logic here is really profound. He's arguing that our lives aren't our own personal property to do whatever we want with. No, he says they belong to a higher authority.

And because Christ is the ultimate authority over everything, life and death, then every single part of our life should be lived to honor him. Man, a perspective like that really makes arguments over diet seem incredibly small, doesn't it? And then Paul just elevates the whole conversation even further. He basically contrasts the, well, the trivial stuff they were fighting about with the actual substance of their community's mission.

He's showing them what they should really be concerned with. And wow, the contrast couldn't be more stark. Paul argues that this whole kingdom of God thing is not about rules for eating and drinking or winning debates over non-essentials.

What it is about is righteousness, peace within the community, and this deep abiding joy from the Holy Spirit. It's like he's saying, guys, you're fighting over the menu, but you're completely missing the point of the entire feast. So what's the practical application here? It's actually really simple, but so powerful.

The real measure of our choices in these gray areas shouldn't be, am I technically right? Instead, the question we should be asking is, does this action build up the person next to me? Does this contribute to peace, the health of the whole community? That's what trumps our own personal preference every time. All right, so finally, Paul doesn't just leave them with a bunch of principles. He gives them a person to imitate.

He points them to the ultimate model for this kind of selfless community-focused life. And this, this is the mic drop moment of the whole argument. The entire call to set aside our own preferences for the good of other people is rooted in the example of Jesus Christ himself, the one who came not to be served, but to serve.

I mean, if he didn't live just to please himself, how can anyone who follows him insist on getting their own way? So what's the big takeaway from all of this? Well, it really boils down to a simple three-step action plan. Number one, welcome one another. Accept people, imperfections and all, just like Christ accepted you.

Number two, build each other up. Actively prioritize choices that strengthen your community. And third, please your neighbor.

Intentionally seek what's good for others, not just what feels right for you. And that really leaves us with a pretty challenging question for our own lives, doesn't it? In all the gray areas where we disagree, and let's be honest, that happens in our communities, at work, even in our own families, are our choices and our attitudes a force for building others up, or are they, maybe subtly, tearing them down? I think the answer to that question reveals what we truly value most: being right or being in community.