

Romans 14:1–15:12

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Craig Keener explores how the theological foundations of Romans translate into the practical mandate to love one's neighbor by navigating cultural and religious differences within the church. The discussion focuses on Romans 14:1–15:12, where Paul addresses tensions between "strong" and "weak" believers regarding Jewish food customs and sacred days, urging both groups to refrain from judging one another since every believer ultimately serves the same Lord. Keener emphasizes that while core moral principles are non-negotiable, many communal conflicts involve contextualization and non-essential traditions that should never supersede the pursuit of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. By highlighting Christ as the ultimate servant who welcomed both the circumcision and the Gentiles, Keener illustrates that the goal of the Christian life is to build up the community through mutual acceptance and sacrificial love.

Outline

I. Introduction to Romans 14:1–15:12

- **A.** Practical application of theological principles: translating theology into loving one's neighbor (context of Rom 13).
- **B.** The core mandate: respecting one's cultural customs and traditions without violating moral principles.
- **C.** Primary context of Romans 14: addressing Jewish food customs and the legalities of keeping kosher.
- **D.** Comparison with 1 Corinthians 8: Romans 14 deals with less severe issues (kosher food) rather than food offered directly to pagan idols.

II. The Prohibition of Mutual Judgment (Rom 14:3–13)

- **A.** The relationship between eaters (strong) and abstainers (weak):
 - **1.** Abstainers must not disdain or look down on those who feel free to eat all foods.
 - **2.** Eaters must not judge or condemn those who abstain.
- **B.** Key linguistic patterns in the letter:
 - **1.** Frequent use of judgment vocabulary (*krino* and its cognates) in 14:3, 4, 10, and 13.
 - **2.** Echoes of Romans 2:1–3, shifting from Jews judging Gentiles to non-kosher eaters judging kosher keepers.
- **C.** Do not judge God's own household servants (*ketes*):
 - **1.** Judging another's servant was considered extremely rude and inappropriate in ancient society.
 - **2.** Believers are fellow servants of God; only God has the authority to judge them.
- **D.** The concept of the Judgment Seat of God (*Bema*):
 - **1.** Historical context of the *Bema* as the high judicial rostrum in the Roman and Corinthian forums.
 - **2.** Everyone must appear before the judgment seat of God/Christ (Rom 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10).
 - **3.** Scripture support from Isaiah 45:23 (every knee will bow, every tongue will praise God) showing God's role as the ultimate judge.
 - **4.** Echoes of Jesus' teaching on non-judgment (Matthew 7:1; Luke 6:37; John 7:24).

III. The Controversy Over Sacred Days and the Sabbath

- **A.** Paul's digression on Holy Days as a secondary illustration of custom differences:
 - **1.** Jewish festivals and the historical debates about the calendar (solar calendar of the Essenes vs. lunar calendar of the Pharisees).

- **2.** Roman market days (every 8–9 days) and cultural concepts of inauspicious days.
- **3.** Interest in the Sabbath among Roman Gentiles (Sabbath sympathizers putting out Sabbath lamps).
- **B. Old Testament background of the Sabbath:**
 - **1.** The Sabbath as a prominent Ten Commandment law; violating it was a capital offense in the Old Testament.
 - **2.** Isaiah 56:3–8 honors eunuchs and foreigners who choose to keep God's Sabbaths.
 - **3.** Later Jewish traditions, such as the Mishnah and Dead Sea Scrolls, and the development of Sabbath laws.
 - **4.** Creation model of rest (Genesis 2): God setting a physical model of rest for humans, animals, and the land.
- **C. Jesus' approach to the Sabbath in the Gospels:**
 - **1.** Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees: prioritizing healing, celebration, and relief over legalistic boundaries (Matt 11–12; John 5).
 - **2.** Jesus as the Lord of the Sabbath who interprets the law's true meaning.
- **D. Historical shift from Sabbath (Saturday) to the Lord's Day (Sunday):**
 - **1.** Early church gatherings on the first day of the week in honor of the resurrection (Acts 20; 1 Cor 16; Rev 1:10).
 - **2.** Second-century writings making a sharp distinction between Jewish Sabbath keeping and Christian Sunday worship (Ignatius to Magnesians; Didache).
 - **3.** Political consolidation under Emperor Constantine, establishing Sunday as a legal holiday of rest.
 - **4.** Unique regional traditions, such as the Ethiopian church keeping both Saturday and Sunday.
- **E. Modern applications of the rest principle:**
 - **1.** Craig Keener's personal testimony: using a 24-hour day of rest as a mental "circuit breaker" to prevent stress overload.

- **2.** Medical and social benefits of rest on physical health and longevity.
- **3.** The pragmatic reality of Gentile slaves and laborers in Rome who were physically unable to keep a formal Sabbath.

IV. Living Completely for the Lord (Rom 14:6–23)

- **A.** The role of Fast Days:
 - **1.** Pharisaic tradition of fasting two days a week during the dry season (Luke 18:12; Tractate Ta'anit).
 - **2.** Didache's contrast of Jewish fast days (Monday/Thursday) and Christian fast days (Wednesday/Friday).
- **B.** The principle of dedication to Christ:
 - **1.** Eating or abstaining is done to the Lord, accompanied by standard Jewish/Christian food blessings.
 - **2.** Belonging entirely to Christ, who died and rose to be Lord of the dead and the living (Acts 10:42; 2 Tim 4:1; 1 Pet 4:5).
 - **3.** Doing all things for God's glory (1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:17).
 - **4.** The rarity of absolute devotion, illustrated by Timothy's unique character (Phil 2:20–21).
- **C.** The Kingdom of God (Rom 14:17):
 - **1.** Linguistic definition: *Basileia* (Greek) and *Malkut* (Hebrew) refer to God's reign and active rule, rather than a place.
 - **2.** The components of God's reign: righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.
 - **3.** Peace as relational unity within a divided church, rather than simple individual tranquility.
 - **4.** Joy as an emotive fruit of the Spirit resulting from trust in God (Gal 5:22; Acts 13:52).
 - **5.** Living out the virtues of God's character through the Spirit, which fulfills the spirit of the law (Gal 5:18, 23).

V. Building Up the Community and Self-Abstinence (Rom 14:19–23)

- **A. Edification ("building up") vs. "tearing down":**
 - **1.** Pauline language of edification (1 Cor 3:9, 14; Rom 15:20) echoing Old Testament metaphors of building and planting (Jeremiah, Ruth).
 - **2.** Abstaining from clean things (like meat or wine) if they cause another believer's apostasy or spiritual stumbling.
- **B. Case study: Historical context of wine and abstinence:**
 - **1.** Ancient practices of diluting wine (typically two parts water to one part wine) to control potency and prevent quick drunkenness.
 - **2.** Roman banquets using unwatered wine or hallucinogenic narcotics for intentional drunkenness.
 - **3.** The 19th and 20th-century Temperance Movement in the US and the UK (Salvation Army) reacting to the destructive social effects of distilled, highly potent alcohol.
 - **4.** Debates among Christians regarding total abstinence and the miracle of water turned to wine.
- **C. The role of conscience and faith (Rom 14:22–23):**
 - **1.** Distinguishing simple personal offense from causing someone to sin against their own conscience.
 - **2.** The rule of faith: whatever is not from faith is a sin, emphasizing personal relationship with God over rigid external rules.

VI. The Call to Unity and Mutual Acceptance (Rom 15:1–12)

- **A. Helping the weak and pleasing our neighbor:**
 - **1.** The duty of the strong to bear the failings of the weak (Rom 15:1).
 - **2.** Pleasing neighbors for their building up, connecting to the neighbor-love commandment (Rom 13:9–10).
- **B. Christ as the ultimate example of selflessness:**
 - **1.** Christ did not please himself but bore insults (Psalm 69:9; Mark 10:45).
 - **2.** Psalm 69 as the model of the righteous sufferer applied to Jesus (Matt 27:34; John 2:17).

- **3.** Hermeneutical principle of Scripture (Rom 15:4): what was written in the past was written for our instruction and encouragement.
- **4.** History and biography in antiquity as a source of moral examples and lessons for the present (1 Cor 10:11).
- **C.** Unity as the climax of the Epistle:
 - **1.** Moving past Jewish-Gentile ethnic and cultural divisions to glorify God with "one mind" and "one voice" (Exodus 24).
 - **2.** Unity is not unanimity; it allows for differences but requires mutual acceptance.
 - **3.** Christ's dual role: becoming a servant to the circumcision (confirming the promises to the ancestors) and a servant to the Gentiles.
 - **4.** Comprehensive scriptural catena supporting Gentile inclusion in worship (Psalm 18:49; Deut 32:43; Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10).