

Kosher Not Required

Leviticus 11:1–12, 43–45; Acts 10:9–16

The message this morning is entitled “Kosher Not Required.” The word *kosher* refers to foods that satisfy the requirements of the Jewish dietary laws. These dietary laws, called by the related term *kashrut*, have their basis in the book of Leviticus and are explained and interpreted in the Talmud, which contains the rabbinic traditions. *Kosher* means *fit*—that is, fit to eat. Certain foods such as pigs and shellfish are not fit to eat, and thus are forbidden. Additionally, since the Torah says that a person “shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk,” milk and meat cannot be eaten together. If you have meat for supper, then you cannot have coffee with cream; it would not be kosher under Jewish dietary laws.

Our Old Testament text this morning was from Leviticus 11. The Jews were God’s chosen people. God gave his people certain principles that they must follow to set them apart from the nations around them. They could eat meat, but only from animals that both chewed the cud and had a cloven (or divided) hoof. The camel could not be eaten, because it chews the cud but doesn’t have a cloven hoof. The rabbit cannot be eaten, because although it has a cloven hoof, it does not chew the cud. Only mammals that both chew the cud *and* have a divided hoof may be eaten. As to seafood, the only creatures that are fit to eat are those that have scales. Shellfish (such as shrimp) may not be eaten. Additionally, birds of prey, such as eagles, cannot be eaten. Creeping things,¹ such as insects that go on all fours or have many feet, cannot be eaten. God’s people are not to make themselves unclean or defile themselves by eating them. The reason for these kosher laws is stated in the closing verses of Leviticus 11: “For I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth. For I am the LORD who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” Twice God says, “you shall be holy; for I am holy,” repeating it for emphasis. God is holy, that is, set apart from all defilement; therefore his people must keep themselves holy. This is a permanent and unchanging spiritual principle reinforced by the apostle Peter, who would later write, “as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:15–16). What I hope to show you in this message is that though the underlying spiritual principle is permanent, the precise way in which this principle is exhibited is different in its New Testament form.

Nevertheless, “keeping kosher” is something that would have been drilled into the apostle Peter from his earliest youth. From the time he was a little boy he

¹ The ESV and NASB have “swarming things.”

would have learned that the Jewish people must never, ever eat unclean foods. Their religion was not something practiced only one day of the week; it was a way of life. As Peter himself testifies in our New Testament text, “I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” The very thought of doing so would have been reprehensible to him; it would go against everything that he was as a person.

So let’s look at our New Testament text. Peter, as we have seen, had been staying in Joppa—modern Yafo—on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. He was staying at the home and business of Simon the tanner. The name Simon (שִׁמְעוֹן) was Jewish. Simon the tanner, like Simon Peter, was undoubtedly Jewish. As we saw before, he was a tanner; that is, his business was making animal skins into leather. As a good Jew, he would no doubt have tanned the skins of cattle and sheep, but not rabbits or pigs. No doubt the bedroom where Peter slept would have had the pungent smell of leather in the air.

Now in last week’s sermon an angel of God appeared to the centurion Cornelius in Caesarea and told him to send to Joppa for a man named Simon, whose surname was Peter. Cornelius, a devout God-fearer, but an uncircumcised Gentile, obeyed, and sent a delegation to fetch Peter. Little did he realize what an unexpected treat lay before him: to learn about the precious gospel of Christ from a man personally trained by Christ and recognized as the most eminent of the apostles.

Now as we saw, Caesarea was about 40 miles to the north of Joppa, so it took the better part of a day for the messengers to reach Peter. In the mean time, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour—that is, about 12 noon. Why did he pray? Peter, of course, had received the finest theological education that a man could ever receive—right from the mouth of the Lord Jesus Christ, under whom he was personally trained.

We who have lesser gifts than Peter’s ought to feel our need the more. We ought to take advantage of our great privilege to come to God in prayer, through the mediation of Christ. Is not our prayerlessness evidence that we do not adequately feel our need of him? Do we really imagine that we are self-sufficient, that we can resist temptation, fight the devil and accomplish great things for God in our own strength? No! The Scriptures are clear: “without me, ye can do nothing,”² but “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”³ Just as our physical food sustains our physical and earthly life, so Christ, the heavenly bread, sustains our spiritual and heavenly life. This is signified and sealed in the Lord’s supper, which testifies to us that just as truly as we take and hold the sacrament in our hands and eat and drink it in our mouths, by which our life is then sustained, so truly we receive into our souls, for our spiritual life, the true body and true blood of

² John 15:5

³ Phil. 4:13

Christ, our only Savior.⁴ It is only through the sustenance and strength of Christ that we can successfully battle Satan.

Peter's prayer also confirmed that he was confident that the Lord whom he had seen ascend into heaven now is alive and seated at the right-hand of the Father, where he ever lives to make intercession for his people. In prayer the saint of God does not carry on a conversation with himself but with his *living* Savior. Why do we not avail ourselves more of the resource of prayer? We have not because we ask not.⁵ "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."⁶

We do not know the precise content of Peter's prayer, but we do know that he was on the verge of discovering something that was going to change the religious world profoundly. To prepare him for this, God put him into a trance.

What is a trance? "A half-conscious state characterized by an absence of response to external stimuli." The word in the original Greek is *ecstasy*, which conveys the idea of standing out of oneself, as that of a person who by some sudden emotion is transported as it were out of himself, so that in this rapt condition, although he is awake, his mind is unaware of his surroundings and wholly fixed on things divine.⁷ You might say that God got Peter's attention!

Sometimes when we talk with a person we get the impression that they are distracted, not really paying attention. But Peter saw something that really got his attention! He "saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.'" This was done three times.

What did all this mean?

Here, of course, were creatures God made. In the creation story we read that "God said, 'Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth, each according to its kind'; and it was so. And God made the beast of the earth according to its kind, cattle according to its kind, and everything that creeps on the earth according to its kind. And God saw that it was good."

These creatures made by God were good. Yet here was a mixture of clean and unclean animals, according to the categories of Leviticus 11. Peter had been raised

⁴ Belgic Confession Art. 35, "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper," par. 4; *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, p. 869

⁵ Jas. 4:2

⁶ Heb. 4:16

⁷ Adapted from Enhanced Strong's Lexicon, ἔκστασις (Logos Bible Software)

a devout Jew. He had never in his life eaten anything other than kosher food. Yet the “voice came to him, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’” Peter was horrified! Three times apparently he said, “Not so, Lord!” Peter was saying something like, “Lord, I won’t do that.” Of course that is something that no Christian should ever say. A Christian is a person who confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. “Not so, Lord” is a contradiction.

We’ve got politicians who profess to be Christians, who outwardly appear very pious, who go through the motions of religion, who carry their Bibles and attend religious services. Some of them carry a rosary, a set of beads which enable them to keep track of how many times they have repeated a certain prayer. Yet these professing Christians disagree with Christ in profound ways. Christ is pro-life; they are pro-abortion. And not content to be pro-abortion, these false professors of the Christian religion not only want to allow the killing of preborn babies, they also want to force the taxpayers to fund that killing! And they want to force doctors, nurses and medical practitioners to perform abortions, even if it is against their conscience. Furthermore, Christ plainly stated that God created man male and female and instituted marriage to be only between a man and a woman. Yet some of these politicians want to replace “man” and “woman” with gender fluidity—an almost limitless number of self-chosen genders! Now for the Christian, there is no going down that road; it is a denial of Christ. Humans are either male or female, and biblical marriage is between a man and a woman. If you believe that killing tiny humans in the womb is good, if you believe that there are other sexes than male or female, or if you believe in same-sex marriage, then that is a denial of Christ; you are not a Christian. Jesus Christ is either Lord or he is not; if he is Lord, then you are obligated to agree with him; if you disagree with him, then you are not a Christian. The Christian says with the Psalmist, “Therefore I esteem *all* thy precepts concerning *all things* to be right; and I hate every false way.”⁸ Whatever is opposed to Christ is by definition false.

Peter was a plain-spoken man; sometimes he put his foot in his mouth and spoke before fully thinking a thing through. He did that when he suggested building three tabernacles, one for Christ, one for Moses, and one for Elijah (thus bringing Christ down to the level of a mere man), and he did it again just now: “Not so, Lord!” The word in the original is emphatic: *by no means, certainly not*. God’s will is that every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord; this, indeed, every human being will undoubtedly do at the last day. When Peter said, “Not so, Lord,” he was not bringing his thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ. Peter had to repent of that statement, as each one of us have to repent of our ungodly thoughts. Oh, may God set a watch before our mouths!

⁸ Ps. 119:128

Peter states, “I have never eaten anything common or unclean.” *Common* is the opposite of holy. *Holy* means *reserved for God’s exclusive use*. The Bible teaches that a baptized person is “holy” (1 Cor. 7:14), that is, reserved for God’s exclusive use. A baptized person is to live for Christ. When a baptized person denies the faith and becomes Christ’s enemy, God is not pleased. “The latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them” (2 Pet. 2:20–21).

Peter says, “I have never eaten anything common or unclean.” What he was saying was that he had always kept kosher, he had always strictly followed the Jewish dietary laws. But now the Lord spoke to him and said words that changed the true religion forever: “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” Make no mistake: this was the voice of the ascended Christ abrogating the Old Testament dietary laws. The lawgiver was changing the law, canceling it, doing away with it—not because there was anything wrong with it, but because it had served its purpose and was now obsolete. The Old Testament dietary laws—indeed the whole ceremonial law—was now fulfilled in Christ. Christ the substance had come, and there was no longer a need for the shadow. Christ the perfect Lamb had been offered on the altar, so there was no longer any need for the blood of bulls and goats. Christ the great High Priest was now enthroned in heaven, making intercession for the saints, so there was no longer any need for the Levitical priests. The way of salvation was now open to the Gentiles, so there was no longer any need for the dietary laws that put a difference between Jew and Gentile. Circumcision had been replaced by baptism. As the apostle Paul would later say, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Those who are Christ’s are now “Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:28–29).

Sometimes something will happen in the political realm that is of great importance, and news commentators will breathlessly intone that “This is the day that America was changed forever.” 9/11 was one such day. But in our text today the ascended Christ proclaims, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” This is indeed a sea change. It changes the whole religious landscape. Peter did not yet understand this, but by the end of the chapter he will. God’s plan is to include uncircumcised Gentiles in the Christian church. Peter, acknowledged leader among the apostles, a devout Jew who had never eaten anything common or unclean, will be forced to acknowledge that this is indeed God’s perfect will. The Jews had fulfilled their role of being the light for the nations. Now the nations will come and walk in the light of Christ. The ceremonial law that had been in place for centuries was now cancelled—done away with. In the words of Dr. Adam Clarke, “The middle wall of partition is now pulled down; the Jews and Gentiles are called

to become one flock, under one shepherd and bishop of souls. Thou, Peter, shalt open the door of faith to the Gentiles, and be also the minister of the circumcision. Rise up; already a blessed sacrifice is prepared: go and offer it to God; and let thy soul feed on the fruits of his mercy.”⁹

Leviticus is a strange and perplexing book for modern Christians. It lays out the holiness code for the Jews. But it’s largely ignored by many in the church today. When Christians cite the book’s prohibitions against sodomy and homosexuality, the LGBT crowd responds with, “But you eat shellfish; that’s prohibited too; you are being inconsistent.” We are accused of cherry-picking. One author puts it this way: “Leviticus says not to eat shellfish (Lev. 11:9–12), use mixed seed or fabrics (Lev. 19:19), harvest the corners of fields (Lev. 19:9), and that homosexuality is wrong (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). If homosexuality is wrong because Leviticus says so, then shouldn’t we also obey the other laws about shellfish, seed, fabrics, and fields because that is in Leviticus as well? If not, then why not?”¹⁰ That’s a good question: why not? How do we determine which laws still apply, and which do not?

Reformed Christians understand that there is a difference between the moral and the ceremonial laws. The moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, is the perfect rule of righteousness. It teaches us our duty to God and our duty toward our fellow-man. We are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves. But in addition to this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel ceremonial laws. These were of two types: those regulating worship, having to do with the tabernacle, the priesthood and the sacrifices; and those that gave various instructions concerning moral duties. Our confessional standards recognize that the ceremonial laws are now *abrogated*—that is, cancelled, done away with—under the new testament.¹¹ The Bible teaches, “Forever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven” (Ps. 119:89). God’s moral law, which teaches man how to live, is permanently binding upon all men. When we break the moral law, we sin and are excluded from fellowship with God. But the ceremonial law; which taught God’s people under the Old Testament how to worship, and how to live as a peculiar people surrounded by the Gentile nations; is now fulfilled in Christ. We no longer have to bring animal sacrifices when we sin; *Christ* is our sin-offering! We no longer have to come through a human priest; Christ himself is our great high priest.

⁹ Quoted in R. A. Torrey, *The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge* at Acts 10:13 (Logos Bible Software)

¹⁰ <https://carm.org/homosexuality-secular-movements/leviticus-1822-2013-homosexuality-shellfish-mixed-fabrics-and-not-being-under-old-testament-law/>

¹¹ https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_19

We no longer have to travel to the temple at Jerusalem to worship (it's not even there anymore), for Christ's Spirit is present wherever two or three people are gathered in his name. In the same manner, eating kosher is not required (though it is not sinful either; we can choose not to eat pork or shellfish, just as we can choose not to wear clothing made of mixed fabrics). We no longer have to keep the Jewish holy days—Passover, unleavened bread, the feast of firstfruits, the feast of weeks, the feast of trumpets, the day of atonement, and the feast of tabernacles. The same with the sabbatical year and the year of jubilee, and the cities of refuge. All are fulfilled in Christ and no longer binding. Specifically, as we see in our text today, we have liberty to eat foods that were considered unclean under the Old Testament. We have our Lord's command, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." This command was not just for the apostle Peter; it is for all followers of Christ. The point is, there is a consistent standard for how to recognize which stipulations of the Levitical law are permanently binding and which are no longer binding. This standard is revealed in the New Testament.

Christian, be aware of this, and be thankful for the liberty you have in Christ! He who delivered us from the curse of the law also delivered us from the details of the ceremonial law. We do not have to remember which sacrifice has to be offered for which kind of sin. All we need to remember is that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth" (Rom. 10:4). Yet understanding the details of the Old Testament ceremonial law helps us appreciate all that our loving Savior has done for us. Christians ought to read Leviticus and be thankful for the work of Christ. We should pray, "Lord, thank you for so clearly enumerating all the laws that our dear Savior fulfilled to the letter. Thank you that you could testify of him, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' Thank you that you are well pleased in Christ, thank you that what I have failed to do, he has perfectly done for me."

Not only should we be thankful for what Christ has done, we should also enthusiastically, joyfully and heartily embrace and love his church, this new body created by his sovereign word. Christ said, "I will build my church"—this new body encompassing both Jew and Gentile. "Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it." The church is the object of Christ's affection, and it should be the object of our own as well. As the Lord says through the prophet Zechariah, "he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye" (Zech. 2:8).

The church at the present time is not perfect; it is being perfected by Christ's Holy Spirit. But God has great plans for his church, outlined in Ephesians 5:25ff., "Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should

be holy and without blemish.... For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church.”

O Christian, “Hasten as a bride to meet him, eagerly and gladly greet him. There he stands already knocking; quickly, now, your gate unlocking, open wide the fast-closed portal, saying to the Lord immortal: ‘Come, and leave your loved one never; dwell within my heart forever.’”¹² Amen! Thank God every day of your life that kosher is not required, that God is calling everyone, Jew and Gentile into his church.

¹² Johann Franck, 1649, “Soul, Adorn Yourself with Gladness” (trans. Catherine Winkworth, 1858; alt.) *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, #200.