

The Christian and the (unbelieving) culture

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[0 : 00] Now we're going to then look into Romans 13, the bit that we didn't do last week, verses 8-14. And I want to remind you that this section, beginning in chapter 12, verse 1, is saying, in view of God's mercies, etc.

How do we live, how should we live in view of God's mercies? Chapter 12 and 13 and 14 and 15 go on from how to become a Christian to what the Christian life is like.

And because of being a Christian, how then should we live? It says all sorts of things about community, all sorts of things about how we think of ourselves, and so on.

But I thought it would be worth recapping what are the mercies that he's referring to. Because he said a lot about that in the first part of Romans.

But we mustn't forget what he said. And I've got three points to remind us of God's mercies. And the first point is that everyone needs mercy.

[1 : 19] Everyone needs mercy. And Paul divided the human race into two major divisions. First of all, the Gentiles, the non-Jews.

And he, I put it in a simple way, but he's saying basically that spiritually speaking, the Gentiles are completely stupid. They don't know about God.

They don't know how to worship God. They don't know how to please God. They don't know how to get right with God. And they need mercy. They can't come to God and say, look at how well we've done.

They can only come to God and say, how we've messed it up. How ignorant we are. What a mess we've made of everything in the world that you've given us. We need mercy.

And many of us are Gentile-like. And we would say, that goes for me. I need mercy.

[2 : 20] And then he put his other division of the human race, the Jew. And the Jew, by contrast, is spiritually educated.

And you might say, well, I've been brought up in a Christian home, and I'm more like the Jew than the Gentile, in the way Paul's saying it. The spiritually educated Jew has the law of Moses.

And so this person knows moral direction. And this person might say they were morally advanced.

They might be like the rich young ruler who, when Jesus said, have you kept the commandments?

He says, yes, I have. I've honored my mother and father. I haven't committed adultery. I haven't stolen things. I haven't killed anybody. And this person might say, I'm morally advanced.

But the gospel says, you need mercy too. Because no one is sufficiently morally advanced or spiritually educated to come before God and say, look how well I've done.

[3 : 24] The Jews, in their history, show this abundantly clearly by being so spiritually educated and morally advanced that they still managed to crucify the Messiah.

It's not saying that Jews are worse than Gentiles. It's not being anti-Semitic. It's just saying that sin is demonstrated beyond all doubt in this act of history.

Everyone needs mercy. And so let me say to you this morning that whether you are talented or rich or poor or skilled or unqualified or good-looking or not good-looking or upper class or middle class or lower class or whatever other class there might be, you need mercy.

And as we come to God this morning, I want to be quite clear that what I'm saying is in view of God's mercies and view of the fact that the person to whom this applies comes to God and says, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

That's where it starts. And I want to say, is that where you're starting? Because if you are not starting at that point, then you're missing the point. Everyone needs mercy.

[4 : 44] Number two, mercy comes by Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead. The mercy that we're speaking of is not sort of general and unfocused.

It is very specific. There is no other place in human history. There is no other place in human religions. There is no other place at all where this mercy is focused other than Jesus Christ, who was crucified and raised from the dead.

And Paul had taken time to say his cross was him being made a sacrifice of atonement. And all the things that a sacrifice of atonement is, it's a place where God's wrath lands.

So it doesn't land somewhere else. It lands on the sacrifice instead of on the people that it might otherwise have landed on. Because this person is a substitute. The sacrifice goes in substitution for the people who deserve that wrath.

And it's a place where justice and wrath and mercy meet. So that God can be perfectly just. He has punished sin, but he's shown mercy to sinners because he punished sin in the person of Jesus Christ, the atoning sacrifice.

[6 : 05] So I want to say, have you received mercy? Have you seen quite clearly that the only place that that mercy can come is Jesus Christ? There's one mediator between God and man.

There's only one name given under heaven whereby we must be saved, which is Jesus, Jesus Christ. So I'm saying you won't get the point unless you were agreed on that bit.

And then I'm going to say, as Paul would be quick to say, that this mercy is received via faith. It's not received by the law, whether it's the law with a capital L, the law of Moses, or whether it's a law with a small L, like being winner of the something or other competition, or chairman of the golf club, or whatever system of laws and rules and regulations you have.

You can't receive mercy by doing stuff to earn it. It's by faith. It's when God's word comes to us, and God's word in the gospel, the promises to do with Jesus Christ come to little us, and God says, you can receive mercy.

Your sins can be forgiven. Your sins can be blotted out. Even though they're red as scarlet, they can be white as wool. I can do that. I do it through Jesus Christ.

[7 : 31] Do you trust me on this? And faith says, yes. I believe it. And that is where we're starting, in the mercies of God, which are received by faith.

And you might be thinking, it ought to be a lot more complicated than that. You really ought to sort of earn it, shouldn't you? I mean, God isn't a socialist. He doesn't give people stuff for nothing.

They've got to earn their way. And actually, God, I don't know whether this is a political statement, but God is gracious. He gives people forgiveness freely for nothing.

And so the mercies that we're referring to are these. Everyone needs it. It comes through Jesus Christ. And it's received by faith.

And in view of those mercies, we go on into the chapter. Are you with me so far? Yeah. So when somebody comes to put their faith in Jesus Christ, things become new.

[8 : 42] Things change very radically. I'm trying to resist the temptation of giving you all the first chapters of Romans.

But he says it's new. You're in a new place. You're in a new relationship, a new union with Christ. It's as if you have a new husband.

You're not married to the law, but you're married to Jesus Christ. There are new powers above you and within you and around you. You have a new hope to look forward to.

There's a new dynamic of love in your life. And he would say in chapter 12, verse 1, In view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. And he's going to talk about how you think.

[9 : 40] It's going to affect how you think. It's going to affect how you offer yourself to God because this salvation is so surprisingly generous and amazing that he can say on that basis you offer not just part of yourself, but your whole self in the service of Jesus Christ.

And he's going to say it's to do with community. It's to do with being the body of Christians. It's to do with the way you respond to things. And down into chapter 13, verses 6 and 7, he said, Even you being a Christian in a society where there are people governing who are not Christians, you're still actually in a realm where God rules and where his grace is operating.

And you're still in various sorts of contract with them. And he said in verse 7, If you owe taxes, well pay the taxes. If you owe revenue, then pay the revenue.

If you owe respect, then pay respect. If you owe honour, then pay honour. And that takes us on to his next statement, which is about owing debts.

So we've got two sections, verses 8 to 10, and then another section, verse 11 to 14. And we'll just go through them. So the first section from verse 8, he says, Pay off your debts.

[11:10] Let no debt remain outstanding. I think he's talking about life in this world. If you've borrowed some money and you've promised to pay it back, we live in a world where covenantal arrangements, agreements, matter to God.

So if you've said that you pay some money, then you should pay it. I don't think he's saying never borrow money. But I think he's saying, If you said you'll pay it back, then pay it back.

Let no debt remain outstanding. And then his next words are, Accept. Accept, well, the continuing debt to love one another. What he's saying, I think he's saying that you pay off the debts.

You know, you've borrowed some money. I don't know, whatever it is, your Barclay card. You need to pay that off at some point within the scope of the contract that you're in. Otherwise, Ross will be ringing you up.

But you never get to the point where you don't have to love. You never get to the point where, he said, well, I've cleared that debt. I don't have to love people anymore.

[12:26] Done all that. Finished with that. Nobody's going to ring me up and tell me to do it. But he says you never get to that point where always, and we always will be, in that form of relationship whereby we're obliged to love one another.

Jesus commanded it, didn't he? Love one another. And he says here then, you accept the continuing debt to love one another.

For he who loves the other, he who loves his fellow or his fellow man, has fulfilled the law. The commandments, do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet, and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule, love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law. And you can see that he's just saying this simple thing, that we're to learn to love one another, and we're to learn to love the other, we're to learn to love our neighbor.

And in a sense, I don't think I'm capable of saying much more about it than that, because what it says is fairly obvious. He's saying that the law of Moses, which is what he's referring to, mentions law several times, is related to Christian love in this exact way of fulfillment, that love is the fulfillment of the law.

[14:09] And if you think of the way those are related, number one, he's following exactly what Jesus said. Let's look at Matthew chapter 5, verse 17.

Matthew chapter 5, verse 17, in which Jesus deals with this rather fundamental question of his relationship to the Old Testament, to the prophets, and to the law.

And Jesus says in chapter 5, verse 17, do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them.

And he goes on to talk about the law being accomplished. And then in verse 20, he says, I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

There's a number of things that he's saying there, but at least let's see this bit. He uses this idea of fulfillment.

[15:39] I've not come to abolish, but to fulfill, to bring the full meaning, to intensify to the fullest extent, to deepen in the deepest way that it can be.

I've come not to abolish, but to fulfill the law and the prophets. Let's go back to Romans.

And you can see a little bit of what he's meaning. Paul picks out a number of commandments. He tells us that there are other commandments that are to do with relationship between one human being and another.

And he says, here are some, do not commit adultery. So that's commandments to do with sexual ethics. And the Old Testament has a sexual ethic.

It's very much to do with commitment and covenant, contract, very much to do with two people making a commitment to one another in some recognizably public and definite way.

[17:05] And it's within that covenant that sexual relationships are to take place. And so when he says, do not commit adultery, he's saying, don't have sexual relationships which break that covenant contract, which break the commitment to the one person, which is the way sexual ethics works in the Old Testament.

And Jesus says, in the New Testament, I don't abolish that. We fulfill it. We make it not just a negative thing, but a positive thing. What does he say about murder? Well, the Old Testament says, do not murder. So don't take your revolver and shoot somebody if they get ahead of you in the queue in Sainsbury's or Aldi or wherever you go. Don't do that. And you might say, well, I can tick that one off because I haven't actually done that. I don't even possess a revolver. But you know how Jesus does this, doesn't he? He takes that, he doesn't abolish it, but he fulfills it. He fills it with meaning and the way he says it is there's more to it than just not bashing somebody's head in.

[18 : 22] It's actually about not getting angry with people. It's actually about what you feel about people in your heart. It's about how you refer to people, whether you insult them or not.

He says, I've not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Love is the fulfillment of the law. And then there's a law about property, do not steal. Well, I don't, I'm not sure that I can give a quick example of that, but we take it that Jesus is saying, I want that fulfilled. I want a full measure given to that meaning. And then Paul gives this other commandment, do not covet, which is to do with the inner attitude.

The inner attitude of coveting says, I can't be happy if somebody else has got something that I haven't got. I was happy before, now I realize they've got that.

[19 : 28] I'm unhappy because I covet what they have. And Jesus fulfills that. Jesus wants that fulfilled in us.

And I'd suggest that the opposite of coveting is contentment. He's saying to the Lord, you give me what I need, I pray to you when I realize I need something, you look after me and you're my heavenly father through the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore for me to be complaining and unhappy because somebody else has something and you heavenly father haven't given that to me, shows a lack of faith.

It's a lack of contentment. So I would venture to say that Jesus is saying that his believing people should have a degree of contentment.

and Paul says you can boil all that down. You can sum it up or you can head it up in one word. He doesn't say rule, he says word, one word. And the word is love your neighbor as yourself. Let's look at Luke 10 verse 29. Luke 10 verse 29.

[20 : 55] This is the time when somebody came and asked Jesus a question, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

And Jesus told him the story of the good Samaritan, the chap who was on a journey, saw somebody who'd got beaten up and sacrificed to himself, at inconvenience to himself, he very generously helped this man whom he didn't know, didn't have anything in common with, but just helped him because he'd actually come across him on his journey, the good Samaritan.

And Jesus says, what's the basis for that? What's the basis for that? In Luke 10 verse 27, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is what the questioner is saying. And love your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus says that is correct. You have answered correctly. And then the whole question of who is my neighbor?

And Jesus tells the story to point that out. The neighbor is not just the people in the church but the people that you come across. People that you might have no particular connection with.

[22 : 21] Who is my neighbor? Well, says the Lord Jesus, the love which is the fulfillment of the law is to love your neighbor as yourself.

You notice in passing we're not forbidden to love ourselves. It's impossible not to care about yourself and we're supposed to. It's not a wrong thing to do. But he says love your neighbor in the same sort of way.

Love your neighbor as yourself. So to summarize that the law is not discarded but honored in fulfillment.

fulfillment. Second summary point Christian love is not basically negative.

The law is framed in negatives. You don't do this, you don't do that, you don't do that. But the Christian fulfillment of it is essentially positive. The summary love your neighbor, do good to these people.

[23 : 27] and it includes the rather uncomfortable implications from Jesus. You can't just limit your neighbor to the people that you feel comfortable with.

It could be anybody depending on who you come across. Christian love is not negative but positive. And my third point, spirit enabled fulfillment exceeds mere law keeping.

I think that's the genius of what Paul is saying in Romans 13. But how Christians love has got a momentum to it, an imagination to it, and a breadth to it, and a creativity to it, which the law of Moses was getting at but never encapsulated.

That spirit fulfillment exceeds mere law keeping. And let me give you a great example of this. There's an example of somebody who, for love of people like you and me, came from the place which was his home, came to a very inconvenient, hostile environment, suffered all sorts of contradiction and opposition, and in the end got crucified so as to save people like you and me. And I don't think that that is just what the law said he should do. I think that goes way beyond anything that the law of Moses contained in its laws.

[25 : 28] And the love of Jesus Christ far exceeded mere law keeping. And that's the example that we're set. A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.

I think it's a rather beautiful thing, but it's a rather challenging thing. Let's move on to the next section. The next section is to do with time. Understanding time.

Verse 11, and do this understanding the time or the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

The night is nearly over, the day is almost here, so let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us walk decently, let us behave decently as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy or getting worked up about things, rather clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature of the flesh.

So let's take that as it comes. The first thing he's saying is understand the timeline. So he says it's important for Christian people to understand how time works.

[27 : 09] And you might say that's rather surprising, I thought the only thing that Jesus cared about was the here and now. Actually, no. He says we only live properly if we understand the timeline.

And the timeline is we look back in the past, Christ died and rose again. And we look to the future, a new day is coming when the Lord Jesus Christ comes and restores all things and comes as judge. and the sun is just beginning to peep over the horizon. So he says the day has already begun to dawn. And if you like the alarm clock has started ringing.

And we've got two people there, one person who's got his nightcap on, who's fast asleep and snoring, and the other person who's jumped up and is trying to find his t-shirt and trousers and get dressed.

And he says that's the picture that you need to have in mind. And it's to do with what Christian technical term is eschatology. Eschatology, because eschaton means last, so last day, last things.

[28 : 21] And I don't want you to get tangled up, because for some people eschatology brings them into all sorts of arguments about being post-trib, pre-rapture, post-millennium, all sorts of things like that, which at the very least are making a mountain out of a molehill, but at worst confuse us from the main point, which is, there is a timeline, Jesus died and was raised, and he's coming again as redeemer and judge, and we are living smack between those two great events.

So, eschatology is to do with the final end of things, and I need to say a little bit more about the eschatology, because eschatology has a logic to it, and a little bit like the difficult themes of predestination and election, you have to learn how to connect up the different parts of it.

If you connect them up wrong, you can get into a huge tangle. So, it's not only what the parts are, but how you connect them that matters. So, you could have an eschatological logic, which says, Jesus is coming again, he's going to judge the world, everything will be made new, so the logical thing to do is to just sit and wait.

There is a certain logic to that, and the example that you could give would be to say, if you do anything else, it's just like moving the deck chairs on the Titanic.

The Titanic was that great big ship that sank, and moving the deck chairs is pretty pointless. So, people might say the logic of this is you just sit and wait.

[30 : 17] Okay, that's logic A. Logic B is you withdraw into a Christian bubble. so you just meet your Christian friends and you try and keep out of the way of the nasty world, and it can be done, particularly if you've got enough money.

So, I'm told, but I don't know whether it's correct or not, that it's possible in some Christian churches in America, because they're so big and they've got their own leisure centre and school and university and everything else, that you can just live in a Christian bubble.

So, I've called that the nuclear bunker logic. So, you just get into your bunker and get on with things, but it's just hidden away from everything else.

And there is a logic to that, but my version C is that you say the dawn is coming, that will be a new form of existence, there will be a new world, there will be a new heaven and a new earth, that's where I belong and I shall live now as if I belong to there already.

That's logic C. It's a citizenship logic. And I'll try and find a couple of examples of this. So, you might say, so Christoph might say, Christoph is from Switzerland, he might say, my home country is Switzerland, and I don't want to forget it while I'm here in England, and every day I will eat muesli, and every day I will speak Swiss German, and every day I will live as a Swiss man, I will even bring my military rifle in case of warding off unknown attackers, and I will live like a Swiss person even though I'm here in England.

[32 : 13] England. Now he could say that, where is Christoph? There you are, but I don't think he has said that because he talks to us in English and he eats the same food as we eat, and I haven't seen any firearms.

So I don't think he is, but you see the point, and you get things like expatriate communities, so when we were in Cyprus, there were some expats there, and they don't learn Cypriot Greek, they speak English, and they don't do Cypriot things, they live in, they don't live in Cypriot houses, they live in massive half million pound houses with finished glass and self-sufficient energy and swimming pools, and they live in an English way, they watch English television even though they're in a foreign country.

Do you see the point, the idea of citizenship, keeping, your citizenship even though you're in a foreign country? And there's a very nice book which somebody gave me as a present, where it refers to the Narnia books, which some of you will have read, books by C.S.

Lewis about a country called Narnia where the Christ figure Aslan is the king, and one of the characters in this is removed from Narnia, where Aslan reigns, and brought into some other horrible place, and told not to believe in Aslan anymore, and not to live like that, and this character says, I'd prefer to live like a Narnian, come what may, do to me what you may, I believe in Aslan, and I'm going to live as if that country is the country I belong to, and it's one of those bits in the story where if you're reading it to a child, you have to avoid weeping on the page because it's such a good thing to say.

So which of those is the biblical logic? And I want to say that the biblical logic is not A, just sit and wait, and it's not B, withdraw into a Christian bubble, because as you will have noticed, what Paul was saying in the earlier part of the chapter is, there is a way to live in the society that you are in.

[34 : 36] I think that's a point worth pondering, a Christian is able to live in whatever difficult situation you're in, there's enough in the gospel, and enough in God's providence, and enough in prayer for you to be able to live in, roughly speaking, the situation that you're in, the employment that you're in, etc.

etc. Paul's logic is not A or B, it's C, and he says the day is coming, so don't live as if you are children of the night, don't do that, don't be fast asleep, but put your clothes on as children of the day, and start living as children of the day, and he gives us a set of opposites.

which we'll just look at. So, if you were to live as citizens of this world, you might get involved with the deeds of darkness, verse 12.

The night is nearly over, the day is almost here, let us put aside the deeds of darkness, and put on the weapons of light. Interesting that he doesn't say clothes of light, he says weapons, or armor.

So, there's something quite military about it, it's saying if you're going to live according to the coming world, you're going to have to fight a bit, you're going to be ready to fight, it won't come easy, you're going to have to take yourself in hand, you're going to have to be a bit like a soldier.

[36 : 12] And then he gives some more opposites. So he says, let us, verse 13, let us walk decently.

decently. So he uses a word which means something like wholesome or clean. Let's live that way, because that's the life of heaven, isn't it? There's nothing indecent or unclean about the life of the world to come.

So let's live like that here. Let's be motivated to do that. And he makes some opposites. As opposed to orgies and drunkenness.

So the sort of parties in which the idea is to lose your humanness by alcohol or substances or whatever, or sexual behavior.

Not in orgies and drunkenness. And he says, not in sexual immorality. So he uses a word which means bed and turns it into a verb. not in promiscuity.

[37 : 16] And the sort of sexual activity that doesn't fulfill the vision of the Bible. And debauchery, he puts another word for sexual excess.

The Roman culture is full of these things. And then interestingly he puts at the end as another thing to avoid, dissension. So being dysfunctional in your relationships.

Being always difficult. Always awkward. Arguing. And he uses the word *zelos* which usually means, it can be good, being enthusiastic.

But here he's using it to mean jealousy. Being factional. Making a big thing out of things that don't need to be made a big thing out of.

Being divisive. He says, that's this world. But we belong to another world. We're citizens of that other world. Let's put on Jesus Christ.

[38 : 20] The verb for put on is almost like to sink into. Which is rather an interesting thought. So you sink into an armchair, don't you? Or you sink into your duvet.

He says, put on, sink into Jesus Christ and all the things that are to do with him. Those are the two opposites. Let's be children of the day.

Let's be citizens of the day. Let's put on Jesus Christ as if he were clothing, really. And one little extra bit he puts at the end.

Clothe yourselves with Jesus Christ and don't think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. don't take forethought to do the desiring of the flesh.

I remember hearing an example of this. This was a little boy called Johnny and when he came back from school he would always go past the canal and his mum said, Johnny you must never ever go swimming in the canal.

[39 : 24] You must never ever go swimming in the canal. It was very dangerous, very cold, you won't like it and it will do you harm. And Johnny said, yes mum, but can I take my swimming costume and my towel with me in case I get tempted?

And I think it's a perfect example of what Paul's saying don't do. Don't think ahead as to how you can gratify the desires of the flesh.

Don't. So we've looked at number one, in view of the mercies of God, live in love which is the fulfilment of the law.

And because of the time scale, it's now time to wake up and live as children of the light and it's all by the mercy of God. Let's sing together.

Thank you.