

COMMITMENT SUNDAY - The Gospel and Ministry

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[0 : 0 0] Well, friends, let's pray together. Father, we pray that you would help us to understand your word and understanding it, help us to live in faith in Jesus and in confidence in you and in obedience.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, they are designed to sell. Inevitably, they are somewhat sensationalistic.

Therefore, they may not tell us, of course, the whole story of normal work and family life in Australian society. However, the newspapers that we publish do give us a window into our society and into our world.

And the picture they paint, at least if yesterday's two newspapers that I read are in indication, the world that we live in here in Australia is a world full of envy, a place where we look to the rich and the famous and where we envy their fame.

We covet their fortunes. We gossip and thrive about their family lives. It's a world where the elderly are victims of abuse, in this case, in cruel arson.

[1 : 0 9] The world we live in in Australia is a world where sex has gone crazy, where children are sexually abused by those in power at many levels of our society, where the most prolific and visited websites are concerned with nothing but sex, and where much of it degenerates into abuse and even greater depravity, where murder is common, where strife jumps from country to country with apparent abandon.

According to our papers, there are in our world people and rulers and authority structures that are insolent, haughty, crafty, God-denying. There are politicians in our world who dismantle moral norms and ordinary people who cheer from the sidelines as they do it.

Corporate and individual greed in our world is bringing whole countries to their knees and threatening the good of all. Our movies deify violence and glory and ruthlessness and revenge.

Though our nature in the world screams out that there is a creator, our world does not. Instead, we worship the creatures, whether in human form or ecological form or many other forms.

Some defy the screams and actively hate the very nature of God and the very notion of God himself. If the major sections of our newspaper, you know all those little extra bits that they put in the middle of it, are any guide, then the focus of our existence is money, property, leisure, food, celebrity, money, technology, sport, and the good life that has nothing to do with God and godliness.

[2 : 4 3] And the day of rest and reflecting upon God, the creator and the redeemer, is now a weekend filled with leisure, filled with soaking up the benefits of our wealth.

Friends, if you don't believe me, then pick up any Saturday newspaper just as I did yesterday. This is not everything to say about our world, of course. Our world is also a world full of immense good.

And you can see that. However, there is a solid, abiding, restless, and pervasive evil that saturates our world. However, let me urge you to think and recognize that if that is true of the world, and if you recognize it in the world, then that is not anything new.

For this is the world that Paul the Apostle saw in his time. And many of the things that occur in our time occurred in his as well. Let me show you. Pick up your Bibles and have a look at Romans chapter 1 with me.

So Romans chapter 1. And hopefully you're still there. But otherwise, it is on page, well, the bit I want to look at is on page 914.

[3 : 57] I want you to read with me. I'm going to read with you verses 18 through to 32. And as we read through it, I want you to ask, what do you think humanity is? What is the humanity that Paul perceives in his own world?

Well, let's read it. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them.

And ever since the creation of the world, his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse.

For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking. And their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore, God gave them up in the in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie.

[5 : 07] And they worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason, God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural.

And in the same way, also, the men giving up natural intercourse with women were consumed with passion for each other. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own passion the due penalty of their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and the things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness.

They are gossips, slanderers, God haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious against parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

They know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die. Yet they not only do them, but they even applaud those who practice them. Now, if you don't hear echoes of our world in those verses, then you haven't been reading your newspaper and you haven't been looking at the news.

[6 : 18] Friends, I wonder if you can hear and see Paul's world. Can you see the things in it that are strikingly similar to our world? This is our shared humanity.

This is our common nature as human beings. And it stands, says the first verse or two of this passage, under God's judgment, for it is without excuse to live like this.

It is to stand under God's wrath to be like this. And it is this shared humanity, this shared destiny, that is the focus of God's great grace. And Paul spells it out from Romans 3 all the way through to Romans 11.

The great news that Paul declares is that although all stand under God's judgment, so God has made His grace available to all.

Although all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, God has acted in Jesus. He has given this amazing and incredible gift.

[7 : 18] In putting forward His Son, God has put forward a sacrifice of atonement. This is my paraphrase of chapter 3. He has enabled this for His ancient people, the Jews, and He has made it accessible for Gentiles.

In other words, just as all were sinful, so all can be justified by God's grace as a gift through Jesus Christ. This is the great news of the Gospel.

And it's picked up in Romans 11. So if you flip with me to Romans 11, verses 30 to 32. And this is now on page 922. So let me just read it to you.

So from verse 30. Just as you were all... Paul is speaking to a Jewish context about what God has done for all the world, and he says, Just as you were once disobedient to God and have now received mercy because of their disobedience, that is Jewish disobedience.

So they now have been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you, they may now receive mercy. And then the crunch comes in verse 32. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that He may be merciful to all.

[8 : 39] Hear the words, mercy, merciful to all, mercy to Jews, mercy to Gentiles. And that is all behind the passage we'll read today.

Look now at Romans 12, 1 to 2. This is where we're going to spend most of our time today. And in the preceding 12 chapters, Paul has laid the theological background for these verses. Now what he does is he moves forward to the practical and ethical implications of the theology he's laid down.

And he says, Now there's a number of things I want you to notice just about the first line or two.

First, did you notice the word therefore? It is one of those little words. In Greek, it's even shorter. It's just a few letters. Did you notice that little word that means so much in the New Testament, the word therefore?

And the word therefore points us backwards from where we have been or where we are. It tells us that what Paul says here depends on something he has already said. The second thing I want you to notice is the word mercies.

[10 : 00] Now, I've already seen the mercy. I hope you saw it in the preceding verses in chapter 11. It was there in chapter 11. In chapter 11, it was all about God's mercy to people who have been disobedient.

Chapter 11 is a summary of everything that Paul has said in his gospel. God is merciful. And in the gospel, God has been merciful. He has, despite humanity's sinfulness, God has provided forgiveness and salvation.

He's done it through Jesus. He's done it for all. Jesus is the means by which God is merciful. So the first thing to notice the word, therefore, second thing to notice the word mercies.

And the third thing to notice, I appeal to you, says Paul. Paul is clear. Given God's mercies, these mercies are to form the basis of what he is saying.

And with these mercies understood, he appeals to the Romans. He appeals to us. He says, for if we are Christians, we have received these same messengers mercies as the original hearers and readers of this letter.

[11 : 04] And he says, he's in effect speaking to us across the centuries and saying, do not shy away from this. You were like everyone else. You are, if he was speaking today, he might say, like the people in the, you were like the people in our newspapers.

We, friends, were dead because of our lives of independence and rebellion and sitting under the wrath of God. We were following in the language of Ephesians 2 our own desires and senses.

We were dead to him. We were caught in disobedience. We were under his anger and rebellion. But by grace, he saved us. It had nothing to do with us.

It was totally, totally, totally the gift of God. And such a gift, says Paul, calls out for a shift in behaviour. So as recipients of God's great mercies, let us see what God wants us to do in response in these verses.

So we don't have to wait terribly long. There are two outworkings, I think, here in verses 1 and 2. The first is given in verse 1, the second in verse 2. Let's take a look at the first outworking of the mercies of God in verse 1.

[12 : 15] The first outworking of the mercies of God is that those who have received mercies must make a presentation to God. The language that's used here is language of sacrifice.

Those who have received God's mercy are to present something to God. And the thing they are to present is their own bodies. Now what Paul probably means here is not just this physical thing, but ourselves, our whole being.

We're to give our whole being in consecration to God. And that involves our physical bodies, our relational world, every aspect of our being. Friends, we really need to understand this.

The Christian life is not simply something that is done in your heart or in your brain. It is not simply your spiritual existence, as it were, divorced from the ordinary and real world.

No, it is not divorced from what we do with our bodies. It is not divorced from what we do with our relationships. The presentation that we make to God is a presentation of our whole being and every aspect of our existence.

[13 : 23] The language is language of sacrifice. And you can see it in the second half of the verse because he says that sacrifice has got to be a living one, that is, it's spiritually alive, it is holy, that is, it is dedicated or set aside for God, it is acceptable or well-pleasing to God, that is, it's as though it's a sweet-smelling, favourable, pleasing thing to God, understand what's being said.

We are so used to thinking that the Christian life is one of bathing in God's mercies. And rightly, it is. We are so used to thinking that we have got now a new status before God.

We are forgiven, justified, reconciled, made friends with God. The Christian existence comes for us one of soaking up the benefits won at the hands of the sacrifice of Christ.

But friends, the Christian life is not just soaking things up. It is one of active sacrifice, giving a spiritual sacrifice to God, one that says, God, I am here to do your bidding.

People whose whole being is now tied up with dedication to God and service of Him, living as willing slaves of Christ. That is what Paul calls our spiritual worship.

[14 : 51] Now, if you're reading the New Revised Standard Version, which is the one that's in your pews there, you'll notice there's a little footnote near the word spiritual. Can you see it there? The footnote explains that you can also explain the word spiritual or translate it as reasonable.

Now, I think that's probably closer to Paul's meaning here. Another version might be understandable worship. And I think what Paul is saying is this, he's saying, the presentation of your whole being to God in a life of sacrifice is to show understandable understanding, worship.

In other words, it's a life that flows from the gospel, a life that reflects that you've truly understood Romans 1 to 11, as it were, a life of worship and service that flows from a true grip on the truths of the gospel.

Friends, I do want you to notice something here. Paul is not writing at this point to elite Christians. He's not writing to missionaries. He's not writing to full-time gospel ministers.

He's writing to all Christians. He's writing to you. And he's writing to me. And God is using him to speak to us. And he's telling us, your lives are not your own.

[16 : 12] You have been bought with a price, the death of God's own son. This has been an incredible mercy. And it demands an incredible worshipful response.

And that worship is to give your whole beings to God. Now, with that said, I wonder if I might add an aside at this point. See, I think we modern Christians have fudged a little bit at this point.

Our tendency as modern Christians is to reserve the word worship for something we do with our eyes closed, focused on adoration of God, isn't it? That is, we tend to think of the word worship as this, or something that we do when we sing together.

Now, that is okay and right to some degree. After all, adoration is an appropriate response, isn't it, to God's mercies? It is quite right to do that. Praise is an appropriate response to God's mercies.

However, friends, it is not the whole response. It is not even, if I could put it this way, the major response. You see, this is the only time in Paul's writings that he uses this particular word for worship in all of his writings.

[17 : 25] And when he does, he uses it for what? The giving of our whole selves to God. Grasp what I'm saying. For poor worship is not so much something you do with your eyes closed, focused on adoration of God.

No. It is something you do with your eyes open. Open on God's mercies in Christ. It is something that you do with your eyes open, looking for opportunity to serve Christ with your neighbour.

It is something you do with your hands open, ready to help and assist your neighbour in whatever you can do. It is love of God and love of your neighbour. It is not changed from Old Testament to New Testament.

And it is done with your hands open. You can see this in verses 3-8. But please hear me. Worship is not something you do so much with your eyes closed, focused on adoration of God.

Now it's something you do with your eyes on God's mercy to you in Christ. And then your eyes on your neighbour and your hand open and ready to serve your neighbour.

[18 : 39] Okay, let's see, let's move on now to verse 2 and have a look at it. This is the second outworking. And in some senses, the second outworking is actually the means by which you accomplish the first.

And there are two parts to this. The first part is to be not conformed to this age. Now again, you'll notice if you're looking at your Bibles there, it actually says this word, but there's a little footnote that says that actually world in Greek actually is age and not world.

The background is that we live in the world, the age of Romans 1. And let me tell you, that world that we live in, that world outside these confines and that world which sneaks into these confines has set views.

These views, that age that we live in, those set views come out of every area of life. The moral norms of our age, its ethics, its sexuality, its attitudes to family life and values, in parenting, in what it means to be a child, in gender issues, in business life, in attitudes to the nature of truth, in financial dealings, in philosophy, in everything our world's values come out.

And we are in great danger. The danger is that we take on what our world says is right and we become conformed to its ways of thinking and somehow think that either those ways are Christian or should become the Christian way of thinking and acting.

[20 : 10] I hear people talking about this all the time. It's as though the world has shifted and we Christians must shift with it. Friends, the mindset of humans without God is directed other than where we are directed.

For we are directed toward God. The world, the age is directed away from God. If we follow the mindset of this age, we will find ourselves living the lives of Romans 1.

We are not of that mindset and we must not be conformed to it or the conventions or the conventions that arise from it. And that will inevitably involve us making a stand at various times and say, no, I cannot go there.

And sometimes we will think they're right and it reflects biblical truth, but many times we'll have to say, I cannot go there. We must reject outward conformity to such standards as those presented by our world.

As Paul says, we are no longer to be conformed to this age. No. Instead, we are to actively subject our minds to the gospel and allow the gospel to renew those minds.

[21 : 21] Understand what is being said here and elsewhere. The human mind is not valueless and presuppositionless. It is fallen. Scripture makes it very clear.

It is corrupted by sin. Its values, its mechanisms are tainted by sin. And if we are Christians, then we have come to know and understand the gospel and our mindset has become transformed.

The gospel news about Jesus Christ and what God has done has transferred us to a new realm. And that realm is full of God's righteousness and life. But we still live in a world that thinks other than this, saturated with human values.

Our minds are still conformed to the values of this age. And so the gospel requires from us a life, lifelong task. It requires an engagement of our minds and that we constantly bring God's mind to bear on what we see and say, is this true or not?

And if it is not, I must not become conformed to it and I must be transformed by the gospel. We must ensure that we are fed by and informed by God's will and the result will be conformity to God and his will.

[22 : 38] It will be the discernment of God's will. And look at the last few words of verse 2. And this alone is what is good. That is, it is good according to God.

It is acceptable and pleasing to him. And it is perfect. Friends, I wonder if I might offer another aside. As I've explained this passage, you might have noticed that I keep referring back to chapter 1.

That is of Romans 1, verses 18 to 32. Now chapter 1 spoke of the sinful world that we experience. It spoke of how the human mind has become corrupt because of sin.

Well, throughout this passage, Paul echoes chapter 1. You can actually hear some of the words that are used in chapter 1. Chapter 1, for example, spoke of the degrading of human bodies. Did you notice what bodies are used for in chapter 12?

They're used to present your, they're what you present to God. That's the opposite of degradation. Chapter 1 spoke of debased minds of humans.

[23 : 43] This passage says, no, no, a renewed mind. Chapter 1 spoke of serving the creature. This passage talks about understanding or spiritual worship.

Can you hear it? God's mercies in the gospel are intended to totally transform us. change us. And the change that we do will be one that we do with our bodies and our minds.

They change worship. They change life. They change morals. They change everything. Friends, I want to ask you today, is the gospel doing this to you?

Let me just give you some examples to give you a little snapshot to help you do the evaluation. Is your attitude to your children Christian or pagan?

Is the way you conduct your marriage Christian or pagan? Is your sexuality Christian or pagan?

[24 : 49] Christian or pagan? Does your morality owe more to the world or to the gospel?

Is what you watch on television transformed by the mercies of God in the gospel or is it conformed to the values of our culture? Friends, Paul is clear.

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. And as you do, as you allow God to transform your mind, it will change everything for you.

It is done in the gospel through the scriptures. I'm drawing near to the end of what I want to say today, but I just want to reflect very quickly on verses three to eight. You see, this is commitment Sunday.

And I've chosen to talk about our commitment to Christ. If you haven't got that yet, that's exactly what I'm doing. Our commitment, our devotion to Christ and to the gospel. But so you've got the theory in verses one to two.

[26 : 01] And Paul doesn't stop with the theory, of course. In fact, he spends the next the rest of Romans talking about how the theory works out in various areas of life. But here, the first place that he looks at is Christian community versus three to eight.

And Paul's point in verses three to eight is very clear. He said, if you are wholly devoted to God, you will be dedicated to God's people. You'll be committed to doing what is good for them. And the first step in acting right with them is to get your minds in shape by the gospel.

You see, the gospel makes clear that everyone who's Christian is only Christian because of God's mercy. Therefore, in Christian community, there's no great or small. One of the disadvantages about putting people up in pulpits, isn't it really?

Nevertheless, it's one way perhaps you can see me not being a tall man. But you can see that there's no great or small, is there? We're all one in Christ. We are.

Why? Because we are all beneficiaries equally of God's mercy. Therefore, in Christian community, there's no great and small. But look back. Look at verse 3. Paul tells Christians they should think of themselves not more highly than they ought to.

[27 : 12] Rather, remember who they are in Christ. And they also to soberly and sensibly reflect on themselves and the gifts God has given them. Particularly, they're to reflect on the measure of faith God has apportioned to them.

In verses 4 to 8, Paul moves on to spell out that although Christians are one in Christ, there is diversity of gifts and of functions within that one body.

Each of the gifts God has given are to be exercised appropriately. Notice the words. And they come with the manner in which those gifts are to be exercised. In proportion to faith, he says, generous, diligent, cheerful.

Friends, we here at Holy Trinity have been called together as God's new people. That's who we are. If we are Christians, then we are recipients of God's multitude mercies.

We are perpetually, we are particularly recipients of his great mercy in Jesus Christ. We have been saved by grace through faith.

[28 : 17] And we have been called to offer spiritual service to God and each other with our eyes open and our hands open. So I've been here at Holy Trinity now for 18 months, I calculated.

And I know many of you are like this. I've seen great gospel responses among you and come to greatly respect your faith. I know of your great prayers.

I had someone this week who put something on the prayer circle in the last week or two and was very aware of your prayers. You are very prayerful people. But you also serve in lots of other areas.

Some of you serve in music, others in welcoming, others in administration, others in finances, others in flowers, in practical service, in prayer.

In concern for the poor, in generous giving, in visiting others, in pastoral care, in teaching, in leading Bible study groups, in ministering to our children, evangelism, caring for our health needs, catering, teaching CRE, and a whole host of other ministries that I am time to go into.

[29 : 34] But today I want to urge you to excel even more. You see, God's work in us is still not complete. It is still a work in progress.

You see, every now and then there's still grumpiness instead of compassion and kindness, isn't there? There are still people who insist on their own rights and don't regard the others, the good of others as more important than their own.

There is still inflexibility about change for no good reason often except we just don't like change. There's still lack of welcoming and good integration of our newcomers.

There are at times I see hints of racism across our congregations and lack of forgiveness. Friends, this passage has shown us that true theology is transformative.

True theology is designed by God to change minds. And change minds are to result in changed lives.

[30 : 37] And changed lives are to be seen first and foremost in our life together as God's people. If we can't get it right here, where can we get it right? Theology which does not transform us is not Christian theology.

So let us start with ourselves. Let us reflect on the great mercies of God in the gospel. And then let us offer ourselves back to God in a lifetime of service.

And let us choose to let that service reflect itself in our relationships with each other and our service of each other. Putting aside our own rights for the sake of others.

Now in Commitment Sunday and so on, the things that have been passed around those little blue sheets last week, there's opportunity to do that by just saying you can get involved in particular areas. And they're all important.

But what I want more than this as your pastor is for you and me as well to choose to allow our minds to be transformed by God's mercy in the gospel.

[31 : 44] And then for us to go on offering our whole being to God in understanding worship. And I want us to open our eyes on what is needed here in our church.

And to open our hearts to service of God's people and the world around us. And when we do this, I want to tell us, I want to tell myself and you that God wants us to serve him and each other with the same focus and attitude that his son had.

For he gave unstintingly and unselfishly for our good. Let us pray. Father, if you appeal to us through your word, we appeal to you to be at work by your spirit.

So that you might drive us to present our bodies to you in response to the gospel as living sacrifices. That these will be holy and acceptable and our understanding worship.

Father, we pray that we will not be conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we may discern what is the will of God, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

[33 : 10] And particularly, Father, we pray for our community life here. That it might be characterized by Christ likeness. That amongst our diversity, we might be one in this.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.