

Responding to the Mercy of God and Christ's Return

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[0 : 00] You can have that reading with you. There's an outline on the other side of it as well. Before I begin, how about I pray for us? Let's pray. Gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you again for your word.

We thank you that you continue to speak to us through it, and that what you have to say is still relevant for us today. And so, Father, we pray again that you might help us to understand your word, but more than that, to live in light of it. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, I thought I'd start this morning with a bit of a confession. Last year, I kind of forgot to get my wife a birthday present.

Not a good thing to do. I tried to make up for it. I heard someone say, that's a wife, that said, yeah, that's not a good thing. I tried to make up for it, but life is busy, and things moved on, and so we didn't do much for her birthday last year.

And so this year, as Michelle's birthday approached, she asked me, so, Andrew, what are you going to do for my birthday this year? To which I said, oh, I thought I'd do the same as last year.

You know how there are some jokes that are funny for you, but not for others?

[1 : 17] That was one of them. The truth is, however, that I did want to do something special for Michelle, particularly because when I did forget last year, and I deserved to be in the doghouse, so to speak, she had mercy on me.

She didn't hold it against me, in other words. And so that prompted me to get my act together even more so this year. So I took her out for lunch, got the kids to help her prepare a little treasure hunt with little presents, and bought her a new bike that she'd been after.

The point of the story is that her mercy motivated me. I mean, being a husband should have motivated me in the first place, but her mercy motivated me all the more. It's the same with us and God, you see.

Point one on your outline. You see, God being our creator should have motivated us enough to always worship and honour him. But we didn't. And the first 11 chapters of Romans, which is what we've been working through at this back end of the year, teaches us, describes to us rather, how we are all guilty and deserving of being God's doghouse, so to speak.

For, as we read in chapter 3, verse 10, there is no unrighteous, not even one. And so all people will be held accountable to God. All people will face his judgment as we deserve.

[2 : 30] All people are deserving of his wrath. But, instead of giving us what we deserve, as we've seen, God gave his son Jesus, who willingly went to the cross to die the death that we deserved.

As chapter 3, verse 23 puts it, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

This is what the first 11 chapters have been on about. God's mercy and grace to us. Mercy is not giving us what we deserve, and grace is giving us what we don't deserve.

And then comes the turning point in the letter of chapter 12. And I think I've got a slide for it there.

Therefore, he says, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your reasonable and proper worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but rather be transformed by the renewing of your mind. You see, in light of God's grace and mercy, we are to offer our bodies, our whole lives, to God as a living sacrifice.

[3 : 45] This is the key motivation that the Bible gives for why we are to live for God. There are other motivations, as we'll see in chapter 13, but this is the key one. But it's also the one we are so

familiar with, isn't it?

So familiar with that we can sometimes lack, or it can rather lack force for us. And we can be so familiar with it that we forget how much trouble we were in and just how amazing God's grace to us is.

Earlier this year, in August, a boat carrying three fishermen capsized off the Western Australian coast. And after being at sea for a day, a Seven News helicopter spotted one man praying. Here's the slide. Here he is. He's praying. He's treading water praying. And he was praying to be rescued, not only because he'd been exhausted from treading water for a day and was likely to drown, but also because he was now surrounded by almost 20 hammerhead sharks.

And the biggest one of the next slide there, captured by the Seven News helicopter. You see, this man was in trouble, wasn't he? Big trouble. He was in danger of death. But he was saved.

[4 : 51] And while his mates, the other two, didn't make it, but he was saved. And when he got on board the boat, he was so incredibly thankful to see those who rescued him. He was hugging them and thanking them and so on.

He knew the danger he was in. And so he was so relieved, so thankful to be saved from it. You see, we have been saved from much worse than that though, haven't we? For we were all in danger, not of death, but of eternal death, what the Bible calls hell.

And unlike this fisherman, we didn't deserve to be saved. No, no, we deserved that judgment. Yet God in his mercy saved us who believed in Jesus. And so if you were here this morning and don't yet believe in Jesus, then the Bible says you're still in danger.

Not from sharks, but from hell. Yet God's offer of mercy is still open to you if you would but turn and believe in Jesus. And for those who have, then can I ask you, is God's grace still amazing?

Does God's mercy still move you? If not, then please ponder how undeserving we are of it and how much it costs God to save us in the first place.

[6 : 02] And in response, remember, we're to offer our whole lives to God in thanks. Or as Paul says here in chapter 12, he says, we're to be a living sacrifice. And remembering the Old Testament, a sacrifice was killed, dead, dedicated to God.

And so we are to be a living sacrifice, alive but dead to ourselves and dedicated to God. This means no longer living for ourselves or for the world. We are to live lives that are transformed from our old way of life.

As Paul describes in chapter 1, he said in chapter 1, this is our old way of life. He said, people were full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossip, slanderers, God haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful.

They disobey their parents. They are faithless, heartless and ruthless. That's the old way of life. But in view of God's mercy, we're now to transform our lives and live differently.

And the rest of chapter 12, Paul gives examples of what a transformed life looks like. And particularly in the way we relate to different groups of people, whether it's ourselves by not thinking too highly of ourselves, whether it's one another by serving one another.

[7 : 05] And whether it's the world by not taking revenge on people who offend us, but by seeking peace. Now, why am I saying all this when we're supposed to be looking at chapter 13 today? Well, because chapter 13 is simply a continuation of chapter 12 in a very real way.

Not that just 13 comes after 12. You remember the chapter markers weren't in the original language when the Bible was written. And so what Paul is saying here, in view of God's mercy, do all of chapter 12 and chapter 13.

It's just all one list, so to speak. We're to, in light of God's mercy, relate rightly to ourselves, to one another in the church, to those in the world, and in chapter 13, to those in authority.

Point to verse 1. He says, verse 1, let everyone be subject to the governing authorities. That's what it means to relate rightly to the authorities.

It's pretty straightforward, isn't it? Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities. That is where to sit under them and their rule. America has just had their elections, and it was a pretty close election.

[8 : 11] It was almost 50-50, which means out of the millions of people who voted, almost 50% of them did not get the person they wanted. That's what it means. But that doesn't mean they should now not sit under Obama's rule.

However we feel about our government or however the Americans feel about their government, part of living our whole lives for God in light of his mercy means that we'll be subject to the authorities, whether they're the ones we wanted or not.

Why? Well, the rest of verse 1 gives us another reason. It says, let everyone be subject to the governing authorities for or because there is no authority except that which God has established. And the authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted. See what Paul is saying here?

We are to sit under the authorities because God has established them. We see this idea throughout the Bible in places like Daniel 2, I think is on the next slide. Daniel says, God changes times and seasons.

[9 : 11] He sets up kings and deposes them. Or in the New Testament, Jesus said to Pilate at his trial, you, Pilate, would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.

It's quite clear, isn't it? God is in control of the authorities. He has established them. He has set up a hierarchy in society and we are to live within that hierarchy. And so to rebel against them is ultimately to rebel against God who put them there.

But there's a second and more pragmatic reason that we're to be subject to them. And that is, they have the right to punish us. So have a look at the rest of verse 2 where Paul gives this second reason.

The rest of verse 2, he says, and, this is another reason, those who do so, that is, rebel against them, will bring judgment on themselves. Why? Well, because, verse 3, rulers hold no terror for those who do right but for those who do wrong.

Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason.

[10 : 16] They are God's servants, agents of wrath, to bring punishment on the wrongdoer, says Paul. We are to be subject to the authorities because they have a God-given right to punish wrongdoers.

See, God has established the authorities in part to exercise his judgment in the world and maintain peace and order. Paul ended chapter 12 by saying, do not take revenge but leave room for God's wrath for it is written, it is mine to avenge, I will repay, says the Lord.

Now, of course, God will do that fully and finally on the last day but he also does that through the authorities whom he has established. Authorities are there to exercise God's judgment and for our good and so says Paul in verse 3, do you want to be free from fear?

Then do what is right and you will be commended or literally they will approve of you and won't punish you. Now, of course, we can be a little bit like a Pharisee when it comes to these rules about obeying the government.

We can do things just to avoid punishment. So I heard the story of a Christian guy who was telling my friend Phil that when you drive, you can actually break the speed limit because the police only do the radar up to 10%, they give a 10% leeway.

[11 : 28] So in a 100 zone, you can actually go 110 because that's 10% leeway or in a 60 zone, you can go 66 because you've got a 10% leeway. So you can actually do that and you can get away with it.

Now, it's not the right attitude really, is it? And my friend Phil laughed because a week after he told him this story, this guy who had said this then got booked for doing 63 in a 60 zone, less than 10%. But it's not about being a Pharisee, is it? That's what the Pharisees did. They did what they had to do and got away with as much as they could. But that's not what obeying the government's about. No, no.

We're to obey the law out of thanks to God for his mercy. We're to be subject to the authorities because God has put them there, not only because they can punish them. And so Paul summarises these reasons in verse 5.

He says in verse 5, You see what he's saying?

[12 : 27] We're to submit to the authorities not just because of possible punishment but also because our conscience tells us it honours God who put them there. Our conscience tells us it's a right response to his mercy.

Now, of course, there are two common questions that often arise out of this kind of passage. Questions you may have even been thinking of yourselves. And the first is, what if the authorities are dodgy or downright evil?

Do we have to obey them then? And the answer is, yes. I mean, every authority is sinful. And even those that are downright evil, God has established them and so we are to be subject to them. Unless, of course, they tell us to do something that is contrary to God's word. At that point, we must obey God who is the higher authority. And again, we've seen examples of that in scripture. Remember Daniel? King Darius instituted a law that said, you are to only pray to me, you cannot pray to anyone else. And of course, Daniel broke that law and prayed to God.

[13 : 27] But do remember that he was willing to put up with the consequences, which in that case were being thrown to the lions. Although there were the apostles in Acts chapter 5 who were told that they were no longer allowed to tell people about Jesus, to which they replied, we must obey God rather than men.

And today, there are still underground churches operating for that reason. But it's not a reason we're likely to run into here in Australia, is it? Though I wonder whether the rules about what we can and can't say during CRE in schools are getting close.

I wonder that. Now, there may be other reasons why you might break a law. If you had someone who was bleeding on your back seat of your car about to die, I would break the speed limit to get to the hospital.

There are kind of grey areas in life like that, but often we don't meet them. Often our inclination is to be like the Pharisee and go, well, what can we get away with? But Paul is saying, no, we're to be subject to the authorities.

The second common question that comes up is, why did God allow even downright evil authorities to rule? Why does God do that?

[14 : 35] And the answer is, well, we don't know entirely. But we do know that they are responsible for their own actions. They will have to give an account for how well they served as God's servants. But we also know that God works good out of evil.

We only need to look at the authorities during Jesus' day. What did the authorities do to the Son of God? They killed him. They crucified him. Yet God established those authorities for that purpose so that they, so that, sorry, many would be saved through Jesus.

And so our job is not to question why, but to relate rightly. For God will also hold us accountable for our actions too, you see. And relating rightly to the authorities includes paying what we owe them. Have a look there at verse 6 and 7. This is also while you pay taxes. For the authorities are God's servants who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them.

If you owe taxes, pay taxes. If revenue, then revenue. If respect, then respect. If honour, then honour. The key idea in these couple of verses is paying what we owe. Those in government have a job to do and we must pay them what we owe them in order for them to do that job.

[15 : 44] As Jesus said, give to Caesar what is Caesar's. Now of course, we can still make legal tax deductions and so on. We don't need to go to the other extreme. There's nothing wrong with making tax deductions because we don't owe the government that.

But once we make those deductions, then we have to pay the taxes. We have to pay the revenue. We have to pay what we owe in order for them to govern. That is right. And it's not just money we owe, it's also respect and honour, verse 7.

We're to give due reverence that is appropriate for the position that they're in. A friend of ours was jogging one day in Centennial Park in Sydney back when John Howard was Prime Minister.

Now as you know, John Howard is not the tallest man and so as he passed her in the opposite direction with his bodyguards jogging in the park, our friend smiled and said to him, hey, it's little Johnny.

Now she meant it as a joke, but it wasn't entirely respectful, was it? And I think Australians, younger generations in particular, don't always show right respect for people in positions of authority.

[16 : 45] I don't know what it is, whether it's our tall poppy syndrome or our convict heritage, I don't know, but we had to respect and honour them and even pray for them. As Paul says to Timothy on the next slide, I think it is, he says, I urge then, first of all, that requests for prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people.

And he lists a particular group for kings and all those in authority that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Saviour who wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

You see, we had to pray for all people and particularly those in authority, it says, so that we can get on with living a Christian life in all holiness and godliness. A Christian life which, by the way, notice, Paul assumes will involve sharing the gospel for this pleases God who wants all people to be saved.

And so Paul says in light of God's mercy we're to live our lives for God by relating rightly to the authorities, being subject to them, giving them what we owe, our money, respect, our prayers. And with the mention of what we owe, Paul now returns to speak about how we're to relate to one another again. Point three, verse eight. He says, let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another.

[18:01] For whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. Paul says here we're not to let any debt remain outstanding. That is, we're to pay what we owe. If it's taxes, taxes. If it's a mortgage, a mortgage.

Even if it's little by little which is the only way you can do it these days with the house prices. But we're to keep paying what we owe. There's one thing that we can never pay off. That is, there's one thing that we're never to stop doing and that is loving one another.

In other words, we can never be loving towards someone one week and then say, that's my quota. I'm done now. And then next week, not love them. No, we're to keep on loving one another. And this is not because the secular law says to.

No, Paul moves to a higher law, to God's law. In fact, he moves to the fundamental principle behind God's Old Testament law. So he says in verse 9, the commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and whatever other command there may be are summed up in this one command, love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law. We're to love one another because love is the fulfilment of God's Old Testament law.

[19:15] And the commandments that Paul quotes here are all from the second half of the Ten Commandments which all speak about how we relate to one another. And he says they're all summed up by that one commandment to love your neighbour as yourself.

That is, love is at the heart of the law. That's what the Old Testament laws were there for, to help Israel love one another as we saw from the Leviticus reading. And although Paul said back in chapter 7 of Romans that Christians are no longer under that Old Testament law, we don't have to do what Leviticus says about sacrificing an animal and having to eat it on the first and second day but not on the third day, we're not under that law anymore.

However, it still shows us how to love one another by not defrauding our neighbour, by not stealing, by not lying and so on. There is a guy from my old church, a great guy but sometimes hard to love. He struggles with a disability and social boundaries. We'll call him Wes. Wes will often interrupt conversations and if you give him attention and then move to a different topic he'll bring you back to his topic again.

He demands a lot of time and he used to live a reasonable distance from the church and some friends of ours, Brendan and Catherine, would often give Wes a lift home. It was like churching and living in Doncaster for Brendan and Catherine and then they would drive Wes to kind of Lillydale and then come back home again.

[20:41] And that was Sunday evening after their service. That was after a long day of serving at other services. So Brendan and Catherine would come in the morning at the 10am service, serve with music, helping out on music. They would lead a youth Bible study in the afternoon and they would come to their own service by which time they were exhausted already and wanted to get home because they had to start work Monday morning the next week.

Yet they would drive Wes all that way and back again. You see, they were loving to this guy and even to the point where they would often have to sit in the driveway waiting for Wes to stop talking so they'd have a moment to say, OK, it's time to go.

Now, what they didn't do was say at the end of the year of doing this, that's it, we've reached our quota now, we've paid off our debt, we've done it for a year now, we've finished loving him. They didn't say that.

No, they kept on loving him and in so doing fulfilled not the secular law but God's law. Now, their main motivation for this was that God had first loved them.

They were responding, you see, to the mercy of God, chapter 12. And so too were we. We had to keep loving one another. Even if people have different preferences to us, even if they offend us or talk during the service or take the last biscuit at morning tea when we wanted it, no one's going to take the last biscuit now, are they?

[21 : 57] That's why we left there. And in a church of our size, unfortunately, there will be people that offend us from time to time, mostly unknowingly.

offend us. But we had to keep loving one another because God has first loved us. And Paul finishes, though, this chapter 13 with the next biggest motivation, not just God's mercy and love for us but Christ's return.

Point 4, verse 11. He says, And do this, that is, do all this from chapter 12 onwards, understanding the present time.

The hour has already 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.

Paul, you see, is talking about the day when Christ will return and usher in God's kingdom in all its glory. He's talking about the day when we'll fully enjoy all the blessings we have in Christ and that day is nearer now than yesterday.

[23 : 03] And it's certainly nearer now than it was when we first believed. In fact, he says, the night time of this present age with its evil and suffering is almost gone and the day of God's glorious kingdom is almost here in its fullness.

I'm not sure if you've ever seen the sun rise over the water but just before the sun comes up there's a glow on the horizon and when you see that glow on the horizon you know what's about to happen. The day is almost fully here and the night is almost completely gone. And Paul is saying here that there's a glow on the horizon. Jesus has died and risen. The gospel is going out to the nations and the very next big thing on God's agenda is the return of Christ.

And because it's the very next thing on God's agenda then this present age is nearly over. Christ and his kingdom is almost fully here. There's a glow on the horizon. And so we are to wake up and get dressed for it.

See verse 12? He says So let us put aside or put off the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently as in the daytime not in carousing and drunkenness not in sexual immorality and debauchery not in dissension and jealousy rather clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

[24 : 23] We are to put off the deeds of darkness and instead put on the armour of light. In other words we are to live those transformed lives that he's been talking about since chapter 12.

Why? Well because that's how we'll live in God's kingdom. Some friends of ours are missionaries in Indonesia Jason and Paula and when they knew they were going to live in Indonesia they started eating Indonesian food and even started wearing Indonesian clothes.

Why? Because they knew where they were about to live and so they started getting dressed getting ready for it. That's what Paul is saying here. We don't belong to this world we belong to the world to come to God's kingdom and that kingdom is coming that's where we're going to be living and so we are to transform our clothes by putting off the old deeds of darkness and putting on the armour of light.

What is this armour? Well verse 14 says it's Jesus himself. It's clothing ourselves with the very character of Christ. I mean what more appropriate clothing for God's kingdom can there be than that?

Indeed this is what God has been working in us. Remember Romans chapter 8 verse 28 it's a very famous verse many of you will know it well I think I've got a slide for it here we are we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose.

[25 : 44] We know that verse well. The next verse we don't know so well verse 29 says for those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his son.

That's the good that God is working in us to be conformed to the likeness of his son. And so if this is what God is working in us towards so too are we to put on those clothing of Christ the character of Christ we are to put on his humble character that did not think too highly of himself but emptied

himself and became a servant.

We are to put on his character that did not take revenge but submitted to the authorities even the very authorities that put him to death. We are to put on his character that kept on loving others right up to the cross.

We are to put on his character knowing that it is the appropriate attire for the kingdom that is soon to be fully ushered in. Paul says or rather God says through Paul we are to offer our whole lives as a living sacrifice.

Not being conformed to the pattern of this world but being transformed in our relationships relating rightly to those in authority to one another putting off the deeds of darkness putting on the character of Christ. Why?

[26 : 53] Two big reasons the Bible gives because of God's past mercy and Christ's future return. That's why. Let's pray that we would do that. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father we do thank you for your amazing grace and your great mercy.

Father we pray that you would help us to ponder these afresh day by day that it might motivate us to keep offering our whole lives to you who gave your son for us.

Father help us to keep living those transformed lives in the areas of government the way we love one another and the way we seek to put on the clothing of Christ's character.

Help us to do all this remembering that Christ will return and that we will live forever in your kingdom. We ask these things in Jesus name. Amen.