Walking the Romans Road

The Loving Life of a Living Sacrifice Pt 2

Romans 13:8-14

Chances are that somewhere, either in your own files, or in a box somewhere at your parents’ house, there’s a picture like this: you, dressed in the over-sized clothes of your mom or dad. It’s a common occurrence – kids typically have keen sense of imagination – and they like to role-play as they grow up. They watch their parents and other adults around them and they like to dress like them and talk like them and act like them.

As he nears the end of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul writes these words: “Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ…” (Romans 13:14). But when Paul writes these words to the Roman believers, and to you and I, he is not calling us to dress up and pretend we are someone whom we are not – but rather he is calling us to dress in a way that reminds us who we truly are. When a young girl puts on her mother’s fancy shoes and a boy puts on his father’s suitcoat, they are pretending to be something they are not. But when a police officer puts on his uniform, it reminds him of the reality of who he is. His bulletproof vest reminds him of the danger of his job – to be careful. The handcuffs remind him that he may face dangerous people. His gun reminds him of his responsibility to protect others. His uniform reminds him of his identity as part of a team of people sworn to the public good. It is in that sense that Paul writes and tells us to “clothe ourselves in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

In fact, Paul uses a metaphor that closely mirrors the example I just used of a police officer. He says in Romans 13:12, “The night is nearly over, the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” The armor that the Romans would have envisioned as they read this would have been the police or military uniform of Rome. They would have immediately thought of a legionnaire, dressed from head to toe in the identity of who he was, the authority he had, and the responsibility he bore.

Now, this letter from Paul tells us that, in one sense, we have already “put on Christ.” When we trusted in Him as our Savior, we are legally made righteous before God. Romans 6:1-4 reminds us that we have been “baptized into Christ Jesus.” That chapter also tells us in verse 5 that we have been “united with him in his death,” and verse 8 says that we “live with him.” We are to “count ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” We are legally “in Christ,” we are “covered with him.” And now in chapter 13, Paul indicates that this means we have to live as if we are “clothed in him.”

This is kind of a summary statement in the middle of a Paul’s teaching about how we are to practically live our lives as followers of Christ. We are being given a “quick start” guide to how the believer is to live with God, with himself, and with those around us. It began in chapter 12, and continues through chapter 15. In the opening words of Chapter 12, we are told that our lives are to be lived “in view of God’s mercy” – in view of the gospel. The life that Paul describes here has specifics expectations, but it is not meant to be a substitute for God’s grace and mercy – but rather a response to God’s grace and mercy. We don’t live this way to earn God’s favor – we live this way because we have received God’s favor.
Our response is to “offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices” – we are a sacrifice because we give all we are to Him. We are “living” because it is meant to be demonstrated in our everyday lives – we talked about two areas in particular – our time and our treasure. Our schedules and our budgets should reflect godly character and godly values. Our lives are also to be transformed by the renewal of our minds – which occurs as we spend time reading, memorizing, meditating on and applying the Word of God to our daily existence.

Then in 12:3-8, Paul tells us how we are to think of ourselves – with “sober judgment.” Not higher than others – but not as useless either. We are to recognize our need of others and their need of us. We are to use the gifts God has given us to serve others, and we are to freely and gratefully receive the ministry of others to us as God has gifted them.

Then in 12:9-21, Paul tells us how to relate to others – with love. Our love is to be sincere, respectful, passionate, patient, joyful, generous and hospitable. We are to be humble, sympathetic and helpful. And these qualities are to be extended not just to our friends and those who are like us – but to strangers, foreigners and even those who persecute us and set themselves up as our enemies!

Now in chapter 13, Paul turns to the wider question of how to think as citizens within a state. How should our “view of God’s mercies” – the gospel – affect our attitude toward “the governing authorities.” How are we to live as a citizen of our land, a member of society?

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For 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. 4 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. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. 6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. 7 Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

At first glance, it seems like this is a pretty strong command to submit to the government in every case, no matter what. We may recoil at that at times. Certainly Paul’s readers could have – they were living at that time under Nero. The Roman Caesars were considered gods, were often cruel and oppressive, and issued commands that were often counter to the Word of God and basic morality. Yet Paul wrote to the Christians living in the very capital city of the empire to submit to the authorities and affirmed that God had placed them where they were. And it is true. Even bad governments are placed under God’s sovereign hand. That does not mean that they always behave in a manner He designs, or that they honor Him, but it means that what they do is not beyond the scope of his authority. The biblical account clearly shows that God will allow us to have the leaders we chose.

But the idea of governing authorities is good – even in oppressive regimes, government provides order, security and services. The degree to which the government is just,
compassionate and efficient varies greatly; but the role and the existence of the state is something God has given humanity for its own good.

But what about laws that conflict with God’s word and His character? Verses 6&7 says we are to give the authorities that which we owe them. We pay our taxes because the government provides services in return. We are to pay taxes; but also respect and honor to them as it is due. Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 22:21 when He said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and give to God what is God’s.”

Generally, we are to obey our obligations to the state – Christians should be model citizens in every way! We should be the most compassionate, law-abiding, supportive people in the city. We should be praying for our leaders regularly and understand the difficult jobs they have. We shall give them what is rightly theirs. But we also give to God what is rightly His. We do not obey government to the exclusion of our obedience to God and His word. In society, if a law directly conflicts with the laws of God, then we have to obey God. When the Jewish leaders told Peter and John not speak the name of Jesus anymore – they said: Acts 4:19 “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God.” And in Acts 5:29, Peter said to the same leaders, “We must obey God rather then men!”

For the most part, we should do our best to submit to the laws and leaders of society so that we are all safe and cared for. In a larger sense Paul is saying is that government is not the enemy – but God’s servant. Now does it always work right? No. Does it always follow the best example of Christ? No. That’s certainly the case in the culture Paul was writing to – Nero was Emperor over Rome – a cruel and terrible man. And yet in that context Paul exhorts the Roman Christians, and all Christians who were to follow, to pay their taxes and respect their government.

While Paul is talking about “giving to each one what they are owed” – taxes, honor, respect, etc., he extends his teaching to the society in general. He says that we should not allow any debt to remain outstanding. We are to pay and repay any debt we owe. Some use this as a teaching of Paul that Christians should never use credit, but what I think Paul is really saying doesn’t involve owing money, it centers on owing love – the one debt we can never repay. Remember – we’re talking about our role in society – Paul says, be responsible, obey the law, pay your taxes, give the government respect – but even when you’ve done all those things and think you’ve fulfilled all of your obligations to society, there is one debt you can never fully pay back – and that is the debt of love. Paul goes on to sum it up this way:

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 neighbor as yourself.” 

Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Most laws and regulations tell us what we shouldn’t do, but ultimately the law of God tells us what we should do – love. You see, if we all followed the law of love, there would be no need for the laws against murder or stealing or coveting.

Paul’s teaching in this section is clear: Be a person of honor. Obey the law. Respect your leaders. Fulfill your obligations. Be completely honest and forthright, pursue arrangements to pay off what you owe. If someone holds a particular position that is due respect, give it freely
and with enthusiasm. If you have made a commitment to someone, be dependable. And this applies not just to our fellow Christians! Chuck Swindoll points out that,

The command to “love one another” goes beyond merely loving fellow believers. The Greek term translated “neighbor” is heteros, which means, “one of a different kind.” We are to love those who are different from us. Different in beliefs and theology. Different in personality. Different in politics. Different in mannerisms. Different in tastes and race and values and history. In other words, with love, difference should make no difference. This is a perpetual debt that can never be [paid in full].

And then Paul adds a sense of urgency to his message to us:

11 And do this, understanding 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. 12 The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light…14 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Understand the present time – each day that passes brings us closer to the day when Jesus returns. When He comes back what will He find us doing? Sometimes I think we as Christians think that we are playing some kind of game or are in a play – we are simply playing the part of the Christian. We little kids dressing up in some grown-up clothes. Paul is telling us to wake up – this is serious business – lives are at stake – and we need to rise to a higher standard than just comfortable obedience to societal laws – we need to embrace the higher calling of love, and the higher responsibility of turning our lives over the Jesus for His use.

Paul says: “Put aside the deeds of darkness, and put on the armor of light.” When you start each day what do you do? You get in the shower and wash off all the sweat and dirt of life – then you brush off all the junk that formed in your mouth overnight – now you are all fresh and clean. Then you dress appropriately for the day ahead – in a way that reflects your responsibilities and duties of the day. You’re all set physically – but what about spiritually?

How about if we started each day by praying – “Lord, forgive me for what I have done that is not in concert with Your character in the last day – cleanse me from all that I saw or heard or experienced that drew me toward the world instead of toward You. Father, fill me with your Spirit today, make me strong and able to withstand temptation – fill me with wisdom to know what You want me to say and do today, Lord place your love in my heart and Your Word in my mouth to do battle against the enemy and persuade others to make You their Lord. Clothe me with the Lord Jesus Christ.”

My dad had a simpler prayer that he had printed in his study. It read, “Lord Jesus, help me to live this day, as I will wish I had lived it on the day I stand before You!” That’s the way to live every day! Let’s live as godly people within our culture and society – with a sense of urgency as we recognize that time is short, by God’s grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

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