

Transformed Living In Your World

Text: Romans 13:1-14

Series: Book of Romans [#17]

Lyle L. Wahl

February 28, 2010

Theme: **Transformed Believers Are Responsible Members Of Society.**

Introduction

Two weeks ago we looked at the compact and powerful first lines of Romans 12.

“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Paul calls us to a *Reasonable And Radical Transformation*. After hearing that sermon, someone asked, “So, how do you walk that all out?” “How do you live this in practical terms?” Paul began answering that question in the balance of chapter 12, which we looked at last week. There he paints a picture of new perspectives of ourselves, others and dealing with sin. He shows us images of transformed service and relationships built on love and an unending quest for peace.

Today Paul continues telling us how to *walk that all out* as he switches focus from ourselves and the church to ourselves and our world. He gives us a picture of *transformed living in our world*. He tells us that *transformed believers are responsible members of society*. And he begins in a place that might surprise us: our relationships to our governments. This was an issue for people living in the Roman Empire. In fact, whatever the time, place or form of government, it always has been an issue. As God’s people we are to willingly submit to our governments.

A Willing Submission To Our Governments.

Paul starts with the truth that governments are established by God. Some who trace the historical development of governments see government as a strictly human invention. And, depending on their perspective, it is either one of our best or worst inventions.

God is the eternal, unique, supreme-over-all authority. Paul tells us that God has established all earthly authority. We see this truth in the Old Testament as Daniel praised God for revealing both the content and interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s troublesome, sleep-stealing dream of a great statue.

“Daniel said, ‘Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, for wisdom and power belong to Him. It is He who changes the

times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings”
(Daniel 2:20-21a).

After Jesus was arrested and brought before the Pilate the Roman governor, and did not answer the governor’s questions, Pilate said, “You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?” (John 19:10). Jesus broke His silence to tell Pilate “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above” (11).

Governments, verse 2 tells us, are an “ordinance of God.” Governments were and are brought into being by God’s directions, by His commands. This brings us immediately to some questions which Paul does not address. His foundational principle is that governments are established by and exist under God’s authority. That includes all forms and qualities of government. Many of them do not gain God’s approval. And, God is not the author or cause of their evil. God sets up and removes governments as He chooses and holds all officials responsible for their sin, just as He holds everyone else responsible for their sin.

A logical question which Paul touches on is the purpose for governments. Why did God create governments? Let’s take note of three purposes. Governments are ultimately to serve God, to be His *ministers*. Look at verse 4. “it is a minister of God to you for good.” We get our word *deacon* from this term “minister.” Originally the word was used of waiters, but then was used broadly of people who served or helped others.

The second purpose helps define the service they are supposed to perform. Go back up to the start of verse 3.

“For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good.” (3-4a)

Positively, governments are to promote, reinforce and reward good—by doing good themselves and also recognizing and promoting it among the people.

The third purpose defines the other side of the coin. Let’s pick it up where we left off in verse 4. “But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.” Governments *bear the sword*. This is a general description of their God-mandated responsibility to punish those who violate the law. Without this, there would be chaos. The apostle Peter makes the same point in his first letter,

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.” (2:13-14)

With these things in mind, we come to the sometimes thorny issue of our willing submission to our governments. Verse 1 tells us “Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.” “Every person.” That includes Christians and those who are not. This is a universal command. “Be in subjection.” This means to submit to, place yourself in the appropriate position under the leadership of another person or, as here, the government. Part of what this means is seen beginning in verse 5.

“Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience’ sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.” (5-7)

Paul told Titus to remind the people he led and taught “to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed” (Titus 3:1).

This sometimes runs against our grain, whether the issues are general or personal, major or minor. One pastor in the United States wrote that early in his ministry his income was low and he didn’t have to pay taxes. Later he resented having to pay taxes and so when he sent his form and check to the Internal Revenue Service, he addressed it to “The *Infernal* Revenue Service.” The next year he improved his attitude a bit, addressing it to “The *Eternal* Revenue Service.”¹ You probably can identify with those feelings.

That brings us to the question *why*. “Why should I submit to, willingly place myself under the authority of the government?” First, because God tells me to do this. He does not answer all our questions but graciously gives us many explanations, and we see some here. God is the One who can always rightfully say “Do this because I say so.”

The first explanation is very practical—submit in order to avoid punishment from the government. Verse 4, “But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it [the government] does not bear the sword for nothing.” Psalm 110 tells us “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” An old non-biblical proverb says “The fear of *jail* is the beginning of wisdom.” While it is not the most noble motivation, it is practical, God-given and sometimes the only one that works for some people in this and other situations. Speed limit signs, laws about wearing seat belts and filing honest tax returns are not always sufficient to motivate people to submit and obey. But the fear of being caught and paying a fine or going to jail does the job for some people.

Secondly note that when the government punishes evil it is God’s minister, “an avenger who brings wrath.” It delivers not just the wrath of the state, but also the wrath and judgment of God. As verse 2 tells us, when we resist the authorities we oppose what God has put in place and so, face His judgment.

The next reason is in verse 5, “it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience’ sake.” Even with the renewing of our minds, our consciences

are not perfect. Yet, to go against our conscience is dangerous. We can, as Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 8, defile our own conscience by going against it. So it is important to listen to, to carefully evaluate what our conscience tells us. And, because we have this teaching, we will not defile our conscience as we submit to our governmental authorities.

Now, let's consider just one question that invariable arises at this point: "Does this mean we are to submit to the decisions and actions of a government that are clearly wrong according to the Bible?" The answer from the Bible is "No." In the book of Exodus, the Hebrew midwives refused to kill the Hebrew baby boys at birth as the Pharaoh commanded (Exodus 1:15-20). God blessed them for obeying Him.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego refused to bow before, to worship a 90 foot-high idol as King Nebuchadnezzar ordered. So they were thrown into a blazing furnace. God blessed their faithfulness by keeping them from being even singed or having the smell of smoke on them when they were released (Daniel 3:1-30).

The Jewish Council ordered Peter and the other apostles to not teach about Jesus, but they continued. When they were called on the carpet, Peter told those leaders, "We must obey God rather than man" (Acts 5:29).

Refusing to obey sinful laws and persisting in doing what is right in the sight of God is part of taking our stand with God, and yes, sometimes there are great penalties. It is part of being a living sacrifice to God, and to loving that which is good, abhorring that which is evil. Transformed believers are responsible members of society. They willingly submit to their governments. They also have...

A Full Love For Their Neighbors.

This full love for others is a debt which is never paid in full or, flipping the coin over, is always owing. Look at verse 8. "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law." Because this follows the statement about paying our taxes and customs in verse 7, sometimes the "owe nothing" is understood to refer to money and debt. But Paul uses "owing" as a figure of speech to build a bridge to our obligation of love to others. It is a way of telling us that our first and last obligation to others is to love them with God's love.

This love debt is one we owe to both believers and non-believers. It is an obligation because God loves us. He demonstrated His love for us by Christ dying for us while we were sinners (5:8). And we are now His channels of love in this world. It is an obligation to every person because every person is created in the image of God and loved by God, regardless of what he or she is like. The action is ongoing. So, our love for others is a debt which is never paid in full; it is a debt that is always owing.

It is love without limits. There is never a time when I can say, "I have loved this person long enough, in enough different and tangible ways. I'm done. I've fulfilled my obligation to him." This does not mean that we will always do or give others what they want. True love is based on commitment and action to God's best for the other person which at times may

be 180 degrees out from what they want. Nor does it mean that we run frantically in circles trying to answer everyone's every need. Rather, we are to use the wisdom God gives to know when and how to respond to every person and situation that crosses our path. *How do we walk this transformed life?* By having a full love for our neighbors.

This full love for others is a love that covers all the bases. It is love that fulfills the Law. Paul drew this from Jesus' statements in the gospels when he wrote "for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law" (8b). This sums up all the Law, and all the Law in practice hangs on loving God with all of our heart, soul and mind and our neighbors as ourselves.² So Paul continues in verse 9, "For this, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Think of another perspective on the importance of love that Paul gave us in 1 Corinthians 13. The chapter opens with Paul saying that even if he has the most showy gifts, deepest knowledge and faith, the greatest self-sacrifice, without love he would be only a lot of noise, he would be nothing, and all the activity would not do him any good (1-3).

Why does loving our neighbor fulfill the law in our relationships? Go on to verse 10. "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." This states the quality of our love for others. It measures how we think and act and so determines if we truly love them. Love always does what is right and good, never what is wrong or evil toward another person.

Going back to 1 Corinthians 13, we find some concrete descriptions. Love is patient and kind, not jealous nor does it brag or act unbecomingly. It does not look out for myself or keep an account of wrongs done to me. It rejoices in what is true, never in what is unrighteous. Love believes, hopes and endures in and through all things. Yes, a full love for others covers all the bases for the best we can be and do for them, and for ourselves.

Transformed believers are responsible members of society who willingly submit to their governments and have a full love for their neighbors. It's one thing to know this and that this transformation should be taking place in us, and another to do it, to *walk it out*. Throughout Scripture God not only states His expectations, but He also gives us motivation—we've see that in terms of willingly submitting to our governments (the motivation of avoiding punishment and receiving praise). To sum this section up God gives us...

A Powerful Motivation For This Transformed Living.

The first part of this motivation is one that most of us would have to admit we would not have guessed if we had not already read it. The powerful motivation for transformed living starts with the fact that Christ is coming again. Look at verse 11.

"Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is

near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” (11-12)

There are different views on the order of events involved in Christ’s return, but one thing the Bible makes crystal clear is that He *is* coming again. Jesus comforting promise to His disciples as He told them about His coming death was

“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”
(John 14:1-3)

When the disciples watched Christ ascend back to heaven, two angels said to them

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”
(Acts 1:11)

Christ’s return is to be our hope, our certain expectation. As Paul wrote to Titus, we are to be “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (Titus 2:13). One writer tells us, “On the *certainty of the event*, our faith is grounded: by the *uncertainty of the time* our hope is stimulated, and our watchfulness aroused.”³

There have been times, sadly, when this doctrine was center stage not only for hope but for division. Today, also sadly, it has been sent off the stage by many. Why is that sad? First because Christ’s return is a certain and an important part of God’s plan. Then also because of the role God tells us this truth is to have in our lives: it is to motivate us to allow Him to work, and for us to work with Him to live transformed lives.

So verse 12 says, “Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light” (12b). Then Paul gives some specifics as we continue into verse 13.

“Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy.”

The apostle Peter gave the same message in his second letter.

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of

God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.” (2 Peter 3:10-13)

The apostle John, who kept living in the hope of Christ’s return throughout his long life, wrote

“Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” (1 John 3:2-3)

Christ is coming again. His coming is imminent, which simply means it will take place suddenly and could be at any time. So, God tells us, “Be ready!” Put aside the old self, since you died to its mastery when you were saved. Look forward, move forward to being like Christ and the completion of that process when you see Him face to face! This is our certain, blessed, powerfully motivating hope! C. S. Lewis wrote,

“Hope is one of the Theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”⁴

Yes, Christ’s coming again is a powerful motivation for being transformed, for being a responsible member of and a transformation agent in our society.

The challenge is great. We can be inspired and say “Yes!”, and then slip or be distracted in the first few steps down the path. Most if not all of us have heard, watched and read about Joannie Rochette’s difficult and amazing bronze medal in the Olympics on Thursday after her mother died last Sunday. A reporter wrote, “The decision to skate in her mother’s honor was immediate, but so, so hard on the follow through.”⁵

That can be true in our spiritual life. In fact, it would be beyond “so, so hard.” It would be impossible to keep on being transformed to be like Christ if it were all up to us. *But it is not!* Look at the last verse, verse 14. “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.” We are in Christ and have all the benefits and resources He gives, as Paul wrote in Galatians 3:27, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Here in Romans he says that part of waking up, being alert, walking with and growing in God is to put on, step into, rely on “the armor of light” and all you have in Christ.

At the end of 2 Corinthians chapter 2 Paul talks about both the triumph we have in Christ and the challenge of representing Him to those who need Him and His salvation. He asks, “Who is adequate for these things?” (2:16). He answers that question a bit later, chapter 3 starting at verse 4.

“Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant...” (3:4-6a).

Always remember, never forget that while you are not adequate, God has made you adequate to be His servant and *He* is more than adequate to keep on transforming you. Remember also Paul’s words in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Him [Christ] who strengthens me.”

Conclusion.

Transformed believers are responsible members of society. I have left a number of questions that spring from this section on the table today. We can work through them at another time. This morning, as you spend time with God and ask yourself the question “Am I a responsible member of my society?”, focus on the features of a transformed life we have seen. God has shown us what some of His good, acceptable and perfect will for us is. This is what He requires of us and enables us to do.

Thank God that this ongoing transformation is His work as you walk humbly and faithfully with Him. Ask Him to shine a spotlight on anything about your submission to our governments and love for others that is not as it should be. Ask Him to engrave these truths not only in your memory, but in your heart, your character, in your words and actions.

¹ Ray Stedman. *From Guilt To Glory*. Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1985, p. 126.

² Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31.

³ Henry Alford. *The New Testament For English Readers*. London: Gilbert and Rivington Printers, 1865, p. 117.

⁴ C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1980, p. 134.

⁵ Dan Barnes. "Rochette's emotional tribute complete." *Edmonton Journal*. Edmonton, Alberta: Edmonton Journal, 26 February 2010, p. C3.

© 2010 Lyle L. Wahl

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®,
Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995
by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.