

Romans 12:1–2 (ESV)

September 28, 2025

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I. Introduction

The gospel is not only the power of God to save but also the power of God to transform. After unfolding the riches of God's mercy in Christ, Paul now urges us to respond by offering our whole selves to God in worship. This is not a ritual sacrifice but a living one: daily surrender of body and mind to God's will. The same grace that justifies us also sanctifies us, renewing our minds so that we are no longer conformed to the world's patterns but shaped into Christ's likeness. In short, the gospel produces worshipful lives of obedience.

II. Exposition and Reflection

1. Present Your Bodies (v. 1)

- Because of God's mercies, offer your whole self to God.
- Living sacrifice: continual devotion, not a one-time act.
- This is true worship: not mere ritual, but whole-life service.
 - What does it practically mean to offer your body as a living sacrifice?
 - How does this reshape how you think of worship?

2. Be Transformed by Renewal (v. 2)

- Negatively: do not be conformed or molded to the standards of the age.
- Positively: be transformed by mind-renewal through the Spirit and Word.
- Result: discern and live in God's will.
 - What worldly patterns tempt us to conform?
 - How does God's Word reshape your thinking and desires?

John Piper, *The Mercies of God and the Transformed Christian Mind*

Now, that phrase, “I appeal to you by the mercies of God,” is Paul’s shorthand summary of what came before in this book. He could have just said, “I appeal to you, therefore, present your bodies . . .” and the *therefore* would mean that all of Romans 1–11 is the basis of his appeal to have them present their bodies as living sacrifices. But instead of leaving us to guess what the summary of Romans 1–11 is, Paul chooses a little phrase for us, and frankly, I’m amazed at his choice.

He has talked about God’s wrath, God’s righteousness, God’s judgment, the fall, sin, death, Jesus’s death, Jesus’s resurrection, justification, the coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives, sanctification, keeping us, absolute sovereignty (Romans 9), and faithfulness to his elect and to Israel. And of all of that, he chooses to say, “What I mean when I say, ‘I appeal to you, therefore, on the basis of everything,’ is that I’m appealing to you by the mercies of God. Everything I’ve said, I mean to sum up under the heading *the mercies of God*.”

Why would that be? Why would he choose to sum up Romans 1–11 with the phrase, “My appeal now, for these next two chapters in all their practical import is rooted in the mercies of God”? There are three reasons.

1. Magnifying God’s Mercy

Paul explains in Romans 15 that the purpose of life, of mission, of God, is to glorify his mercy. Look at [Romans 15:8–9](#). It says:

I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

Christ became a servant to the circumcised, that is, he was incarnate as a Jew, in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. The purpose of God in sending his Son was that all the nations might be amazed at his mercy. That’s the reason you exist. It is to make people amazed at the mercy of God. To live in such a way that people can only conclude from of your life, “God is merciful.” That’s the first reason. It’s the goal of life, it’s the goal of history, it’s the goal of Christ, and it’s the goal of God that people would praise him for his mercy.

2. Living Out God’s Mercy

The second reason why he would choose to sum everything up with Mercy is that mercy in your life towards the undeserving is the best way of life to make God look mercifully great. This is mercy fleshed out in your life. Treating people better

than they deserve is the best way for people to look at you and conclude that your God is great in mercy.

Now, the reason I conclude that is because if I just do a quick run through of Romans 12, listen to what I see:

- “The one who does acts of mercy” ([Romans 12:8](#))
- “Let love be genuine” ([Romans 12:9](#))
- “Contribute to the needs of the saints” ([Romans 12:13](#))
- “Bless those who persecute you” ([Romans 12:14](#))
- “Weep with those who weep” ([Romans 12:15](#))
- “Associate with the lowly” ([Romans 12:16](#))
- “Repay no one evil for evil” ([Romans 12:17](#))
- “Never avenge yourselves” ([Romans 12:19](#))
- “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink” ([Romans 12:20](#))

Do you detect a motif? This chapter is saturated with mercy. The reason he’s saying, “I beseech you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God,” is that mercy flowing out from us must be rooted in mercy. The overarching, huge lesson of Romans 1–11 is that God treated us better than we deserved, and he still treats us better than we deserve, and that should shape us into a kind of people who are merciful people. So, that’s the second reason that he says, “By the mercies of God.” It’s because a lifestyle of mercy is the lifestyle that will best display the greatness of God as a merciful God.

3. Receiving God’s Mercy

God’s mercy to us is the key to our living this way. Now, let me take those three reasons and show you how they fit together. The goal is that he’d be praised for his mercy ([Romans 15:9](#)). The way, or lifestyle, that displays his mercy so people can glorify it (Romans 12), and ground or root or cause is his mercy toward us in Christ. Romans 1–11 ended from with the statement, “From him, through him, and to him are all things. To him be glory forever” ([Romans 11:36](#)), which I think could be paraphrased, “From him, we received mercy; through him, we’re living mercy; and to him, we will glorify him for mercy. To him be glory for being merciful.” That’s the summary.

I’m going to linger on this third one and go back and do what we simply must do in this first hour, and that is talk about what happened so that Paul could say, “Therefore, live this way.” What should we be saying to our children? What should

we be saying to our churches? What should we be preaching to ourselves every day if our lives would be transformed into this kind of merciful lifestyle that gives its enemies food and drink?

It isn't simply that Christ was a good example of mercy. He was. Nobody was a better one ever than Christ, because from the beginning, his life was a scandal, to the end, his life was a scandal, and he embraced that scandal freely so that we could be spared the ultimate scandal of condemnation. So, he was mercy incarnate, saving us when we deserved the exact opposite.

F. F. Bruce, Romans

In view of all that God has accomplished for his people in Christ, how should his people live? They should present themselves to God as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him. The animal sacrifices of an earlier day have been rendered forever obsolete by Christ's self-offering, but there is always room for the worship rendered by obedient hearts. Instead of living by the standards of a world at discord with God, believers are exhorted to let the renewing of their minds by the power of the Spirit transform their lives into conformity with God's will.

Doctrine is never taught in the Bible simply that it may be known; it is taught in order that it may be translated into practice: 'if you know these things, blessed are you if you do them' (John 13:17.)

Andy Naselli, Romans

How to present your bodies as a living sacrifice:

- Negatively, "do not be conformed to this world." This world or age is the anti-God culture that permeates our societies. "Conformed" translates a word that means "form according to a pattern or mold." The world's mold must not shape us.
- Positively, "be transformed." How? By continually renewing your mind to love what God loves and hate what God hates (contrast 1:28)—a lifelong process that happens by God's Spirit and God's word. With what result (or possibly for what purpose? "That by testing you may discern what is the will of God," which is "good and acceptable and perfect." Discerning "the will of God" here does not refer primarily to discovering whether God wants you to marry a specific individual or whether you should accept a particular job offer but to understanding God's moral will (i.e., what God commands us to do) and wisely applying that in every specific situation (cf. Eph. 5:10; Phil. 1:10; 1 Thess. 4:3-6).

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

I. Introduction

Grace humbles us and grace equips us. Having been justified apart from works, no believer can boast in himself; all we have is from God. But the same grace that saves also gives gifts for service. The church is not a collection of isolated individuals but one body in Christ, each member belonging to the other. God's Spirit distributes gifts not for our glory but for the building up of the whole. Thus, the gospel produces a humble people eager to serve one another with whatever grace God has given.

II. Exposition and Reflection

1. Humility of Mind (v. 3)

- Grace destroys pride; faith is God's gift, not our achievement.
- Think soberly and honestly, neither inflated nor self-deprecating.
 - How does remembering grace guard against pride?
 - What does sober judgment look like in practice?

2. One Body, Many Members (vv. 4–5)

- The church is one body with many parts; everyone has a role to play.
- Each member belongs to all the others in unity and love.

- How does this correct our tendency toward individualism?
- What happens when one member refuses to serve?

3. Gifts for Service (vv. 6–8)

- Gifts differ according to grace, but all are given gifts.
- Each gift is to be exercised faithfully and zealously.
- What spiritual gifts has God entrusted to you?
- How can you use them more faithfully for the good of the body?

David Peterson, *Romans*

Paul's challenge about minds being renewed has a particular application to how Christians think about themselves and the gifts he has given them (vv. 3-8). Many evaluate church membership in terms of how it will benefit them, but Paul focuses on belonging to a church in order to give and to serve others. The standard God provides for evaluating ourselves and engaging in effective ministry is the faith he gives to each one through the preaching of the gospel. Every member should play a discerning and committed role in edifying or building up the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 14:1-5, 12, 26; Eph 4:12, 16). This may take place within the regular gatherings of a church or by grasping everyday opportunities to encourage and care for one another (cf. 15:1-2; 1 Cor 8:1, 10; 10:23; 1 Thess 5:11). God is pleased when we serve his people in this way. "While all ministry must be understood as a response to God's grace, and not in any sense a cultivation of his favor, ministry to others is an important aspect of our self-giving to God."

R.C. Sproul, *Romans*

Paul is mapping out for us the communion of saints. The word communion comes from the prefix com-, which means "union" or "with oneness." In order for there to be a communion of saints, there first has to be a plurality. If we are Christians, we are supernaturally in Christ, and if we are in Christ, Christ is in us; however, the relationship we enjoy with Jesus is not simply a unilateral relationship. We have a supernatural bond, a union among ourselves, that flows from Christ. We are to like one another for Christ's sake, because we are in Him and we are with each other forever. That is the communion of saints, warts and all.

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I. Introduction

If the gospel is God’s love revealed in Christ crucified for sinners, then the fruit of the gospel in our lives must be genuine love for others. The Spirit does not produce cold moralism but warm affection, sincere service, and sacrificial love that mirrors Christ’s own. This love extends beyond the church to enemies and persecutors, overcoming evil not by retaliation but by good. In Christ we see how God’s mercy triumphed over our hostility, and by that same mercy, we are empowered to embody His love in a hostile world.

II. Exposition and Reflection

1. Marks of Love (vv. 9–13)

- Love is genuine, not hypocritical or fake.
- Love hates what is evil, and clings to what is good.
- Love displays affectionate honor toward others.
- Love leads to service, joyful hope, steadfast prayer, generous hospitality.

- Which of these marks challenge you most?
- How does the gospel empower genuine love?

2. Love Toward Enemies (vv. 14–21)

- Bless your persecutors, live peaceably with all, never avenge.
- Leave vengeance to God; He is the ultimate judge.
- Overcome evil with good; light overcomes darkness.
- What does blessing enemies look like today?
- How have you seen good overcome evil in your own life?

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermon Breakdown on Romans 12:9-21*

1. Verses 1-2 provide the foundation for understanding this section. We must understand God's mercy and grace to live this out.
2. Verse 9 provides two governing principles: let love be without dissimulation (hypocrisy) and abhor evil, cleave to good.
3. Love must be genuine, not pretended or hypocritical. It shows itself in keeping God's commandments, not just words.
4. Love is not contrasted with law but fulfills it. The law expresses God's nature and character. We should love God's law.
5. We must not be self-centered or men-pleasers in our love. We must love to glorify and please God.
6. Love is commanded and results from understanding, not just feeling. We must think it through and obey from the heart.
7. To ensure love without hypocrisy, we must understand the doctrine we've been taught and let the Spirit shed God's love in our hearts.
8. We must abhor (hate, shrink from) evil, not just avoid doing it. We must see evil in light of God's holiness and hate it as He does.
9. We can only abhor evil if we know and love God. The more we know Him, the more we'll hate evil.
10. We must cleave (stick fast) to the good, meaning what pleases God. We must join ourselves to it inseparably.

11. These principles show we're in the realm of holiness and truth, not just ethics. It's a passion for God, not a list of rules.
12. This is a command to obey, not a passive experience. We must work it out, considering God's mercy and the doctrine we've learned.
13. There is no "entire sanctification" in this life. This is a perpetual command we must keep obeying.

Charles Spurgeon, *Overcome Evil with Good*

Good for evil is nobly consistent with the spirit of the gospel. Were we not saved because the Lord gave to us good for evil? The spirit of the law is, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," but the spirit of the gospel is, "Freely I forgive you: your many sins and vast transgressions are all blotted out for Christ's name's sake, therefore be compassionate toward others." Forgiveness is one fruit of the gospel, and doing good in return for evil is another. Should not the spirit of every Christian be one of unconquerable love? For by unconquerable love he is saved.

And, beloved, this spirit of forgiveness is the Spirit of God, and he who has it becomes like God. If you would rise to the highest form of being, rise to the condition of one who can be injured, and yet forgive. To be just is something—hardly for a righteous man would one die; but to be merciful and kind is much more, since for a good man some would even dare to die—such is the zeal which a loving spirit will kindle. Rise above mere righteousness into the divine atmosphere of love. But whether men love you or not is a small matter; whether you win them or not is also a small matter, but that you should conquer evil, that you should be victorious over sin, that you should receive from your Lord at the last the "Well done, good and faithful servant," and that you should be like God in your nature, this is of the utmost importance to you, for this is heaven.

Heaven is to have self dethroned; to be purged of all anger; to be delivered from all pride. Heaven is, in fact, to be God-like. May we be made so through Jesus Christ our Savior, by the work of his Holy Spirit. Amen.

Albert Mohler, *Sermon on Romans 12:9-21*

What is so helpful here, what's so helpful, is the strength of this language, because this is the distinction between good and evil, and you'll notice there's absolutely no confusion of the two here. The apostle Paul is not a relativist. The apostle Paul is not a social constructivist. The apostle Paul is not an intuitionist. The apostle Paul is not an existentialist. The apostle Paul believes that there is an objective right and there is an objective wrong. There's an objective good and there's an

objective evil, and that is established by the moral character of God. It is revealed in the word of God, and it is to bring forth from God's people to different responses, and the words, frankly, are frighteningly powerful. We are to hold fast to what is good and that's physical, right? I mean with the picture of it's physical: we got to hold to it fast. We are to clinging to it, we're to attach ourselves to it, we're to be inseparable from it, we are to identify with it in such a way, it's as if we are clinging to it like we are lost at sea and someone throws us a life ring and we are holding onto it. We need to hold onto what is good with the same desperation, with the same determination, with the same energy and frankly with the same, the same long-term endurance.

But that word that begins that phrase, abhor: hate, hate. We don't use the word abhor very much, it nonetheless is immediately recognizable to us. We are to abhor what is evil. We're not to dislike it. This is not just an aesthetic judgment. We are not to avoid it, only to avoid it as if it's a proximate issue: we're to hate it. I wasn't allowed to use that word as a boy. If I said to someone, "I hate you," there were consequences to that. I don't remember saying it, but I remember knowing there would be consequences. We're to love one another. We don't hate, we don't throw around the word hate. It is a biblical word. I'm not correcting my mother here, I'm simply saying at some point you got to learn that you can only be a faithful Christian if you actually do hate. It's not people, it's not people, we're not called to hate people, but we are called to abhor, to hate what is evil. That's morally clarifying, isn't it? Isn't it helpful? That's theologically clarifying. We are to have loves and we are to have hates and they're to be biblically ordered. One who has no hates is morally insane. We're living in a world in which there is much to hate. There are ideologies not just to resist, not just to confront, there are ideologies to hate. There are sins at the top of the list we are to hate. We are to hate those sins, but we are to—you know the words—we're to love the sinner. Indeed we are to hold fast to what is good, but we are to abhor that which is evil. That would clarify an awful lot in Christ's church.

13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

I. Introduction

The gospel reminds us that Christ is Lord over all things, including earthly rulers. While governments are often flawed, Paul teaches that their authority is derived from God's sovereign rule. Therefore, submission to governing authorities, insofar as it does not contradict obedience to Christ, is part of our obedience to God. The cross shows us that God's purposes are not thwarted even through unjust rulers, for through the Roman state itself God accomplished our redemption. Thus, Christians can submit with faith, knowing that Christ reigns above all earthly powers.

II. Exposition and Reflection

1. Authority from God (vv. 1–2)

- No authority exists except by God's appointment.
- To resist legitimate authority is to resist God.
 - Why is it hard to accept that flawed governments are still under God's rule?
 - How can Christians disagree with government yet honor God's design?

2. Government's Purpose (vv. 3–4)

- Rewarding good, punishing evil. Restraining function.
- Rulers are God's servants for justice.
 - How does this shape how we pray for leaders?
 - When is civil disobedience legitimate for Christians?

3. Our Responsibility (vv. 5–7)

- Obey not only to avoid wrath but also for your conscience's sake.
- Pay taxes to, respect, and honor your government officials.
 - How does the gospel free us to submit even when government frustrates us?
 - What does it mean to show honor without idolatry?

John MacArthur, The Christian's Responsibility to Government

One of the worst fallouts of this new preoccupation with the political issues, this new politicizing of the church, is that ultimately the ministry of the church is prostituted. And people are selling themselves for something short of that to which the church is called. The church cannot afford to become just a flag-waving, lobbying, protesting voice for government change. That's not our calling. And I am appalled to note that many Pastors have turned from an emphasis on the Gospel to an emphasis on politics, from an emphasis on teaching the Bible to an emphasis on coalitions to support particular legislation. And all of this is based upon some ridiculous premise that Christianity's growth and power and impact is somehow related to the government policy in America.

C.S. Lewis once reminded Christians that human beings live forever, while the state is only temporal, and thus is reserved to comparative insignificance. And to spend your time altering the state when you could be spending your time giving people eternal salvation is a bad bargain. To abandon the message which gives to that eternal soul life with God in favor of temporal change prostitutes and wastes the light. I mean it would be like a great heart surgeon with a skill to save many, abandoning his life-saving practice to become a makeup artist, to fool around with the outside, and ignore the skill which could save men's lives.

Seems to me that the church needs to use all of its power and all of its resources, and all of its energy and forces to convert men and women to Jesus Christ. And that's what God has called us to do.

Patrick Schreiner, *Political Gospel*

Paul is not legislating every situation in Romans 13, nor is he addressing every condition. He doesn't distinguish what to do with tyrants, when it is appropriate to rebel, or when governments have forsaken their authority. That's not his aim in the text. But he is giving the standard posture we should have toward rulers. You might think, "Wait, Paul doesn't know the type of rulers we live under." But remember, Rome was no "city on a hill" promoting justice and the welfare of its citizens. Their emperors were far more corrupt than our rulers. And still, Paul commands submission. This means our knee-jerk reaction to the government should be deference, respect, and obedience. It means our "rugged individualism" needs a good dose of "keep calm and carry on." Negative responses to the government should be the exception, not the norm.

We might be tempted to evade our civic duties under God's reign, but Paul says, "Hold the phone." Because God has installed these rulers, we are to submit to them.

Jeremy Treat, *The Government Can't Change the Heart, but Love Can*

Politics is tearing our country apart. And you don't have to be a pundit to see it. Whether you're watching the news or scrolling through social media, it's clear that politics has invaded every space and brought with it tension and division.

In our politically tense world, we must look to God's Word for perspective and guidance. [Romans 13](#) is one of the key passages in Scripture on politics, and while it's deep and complex, three simple points can be drawn from it for our context today: leaders are necessary, laws are good, and love is better.

Leaders Are Necessary

[Romans 13:1](#) makes a bold claim: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." In an age of corrupt politicians, this command feels strange. Are we really called to submit to government leaders, even when they're driven by greed and partisan gain?

Affirming God's sovereignty over governing authorities and the call for Christians to submit to them doesn't mean those authorities won't be held accountable for their actions or that we owe them unconditional obedience. The point is that all human authority is derived from God's authority. And since it comes from God, the authority of government leaders is a delegated, not absolute, authority.

This doesn't mean God endorses everything done by a political leader. God-given authority can be misused and abused. As Jesus said to Pilate before the crucifixion, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above" ([John 19:11](#)). Pilate misused his authority to condemn and kill Jesus, yet the authority he used to do this was delegated to him by God.

The apostle Peter could write "Honor the emperor" ([1 Pet. 2:17](#)) even though the emperor at the time was a psychopath named Nero who terrorized Christians and eventually killed Peter. Submitting to the authorities that God has established is about respecting the function of the office, not the character of the one in the office.

For this reason, while it's fine to disagree with a political ruler, Christians are called to do so with respect and love, acknowledging the image of God in that leader even as we hold them accountable to their God-given authority.

Leaders are always flawed, yet they're an essential part of God's design for government.

Laws Are Good

Government leaders are called to create and uphold laws that protect people's basic rights and create space for their flourishing. And we can all agree, in general, that laws are good. It's good that 10-year-olds can't drive. It's to everyone's benefit that stealing isn't allowed. But while laws are meant to be good, we have to acknowledge two important qualifications to how Christians relate to the laws of their land.

First, we must recognize the distinction between biblical principles and government policies. For Christians, our biblical principles must shape the way we approach government policies. But we cannot confuse the two. The Bible doesn't give us policies on international trade, carbon dioxide emissions, or public education. If we don't recognize this difference, there's a danger of reading our policy preferences into Scripture and then claiming to have the only biblical position.

Take immigration, for example. Scripture gives clear principles about God's heart for the immigrant and how God's people are to love the immigrant. [Deuteronomy 10:18–19](#) says, "[The LORD] loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt" (NIV). However, while this biblical principle regarding love for the immigrant is clear, Scripture doesn't prescribe policies regarding how many immigrants should be allowed in a country or how long visas should last. Biblical principles must inform our approach to government policies.

Second, while laws are good, there's a time for Christians to resist the laws of the land. We're obligated to resist the law when the government forbids what God commands or commands what God forbids.

Scripture is filled with examples of God's people resisting the government. The Egyptian Pharaoh ordered Hebrew midwives to kill newborn boys, but the women refused to obey (Ex. 1:15–17). The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar issued an edict that his subjects must bow down and worship his golden image, but three Israelites—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—resisted (Dan. 3:4–6, 12). When the Persian king Darius made a decree that for 30 days nobody could pray “to any god or man” except himself, Daniel refused (6:7–10).

After the governing authorities commanded the apostles to stop preaching the gospel, Peter and John replied, “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). In Acts 5:29, they say, “We must obey God rather than man.”

We have an obligation to the government, but our ultimate allegiance is to God. When Christians *do* resist the government, however, they must do so not in violence but in peace, driven not by hate but by love, and aiming not for conquest but for reconciliation.

Love Is Better

While many people look to Romans 13:1–7 for principles about government, they often miss its connection to the next three verses, which are about love.

Immediately after discussing leaders and laws, the apostle Paul says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” for “love is the fulfilling of the law” (vv. 9, 10).

We must remember that while Scripture speaks to the legitimacy of government, it also makes clear the limits of government.

The government can't change the heart, but love can. Politicians can't make you a new person, but love can. Laws can't give purpose to your life, but love can.

This isn't to minimize legislation: it's important. But you can't legislate internal transformation. The people of God are called to be a people of love:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Col. 3:12–14)

Love is the social glue of Christ's community. We're bound together by love for one another and for our city.

Leaders are necessary. Laws are good. Love is better.

John Piper, *Does Romans 13 Prohibit All Civil Disobedience?*

Why Would Paul Write This?

I think Paul, if he heard us say that, he would say, “Listen, here is what I am doing. Number one, Caesar is going to read this, and I will want to make sure that the ruling authorities in Rome know that Christians are not anarchists. We are basically law abiding citizens and we believe that he has his position by God.” That is the first thing.

And the second thing, I think he wants to say to Christians, “Don't get your back up so easily, because being wronged by a government sends nobody to hell, but being rebellious and angry and bitter and spiteful does send people to hell. And so it is a much greater evil for you to be rebellious than of the government to mistreat you. Much greater evil for you that is.”

Always Obedient to the Highest Authority

Now if you step back from Romans 13 and say, “Are there any appropriate acts of civil disobedience?” There are. Acts 5:29 says, “We must obey God rather than men.” The apostles must preach even though the authorities have told them they shouldn't. And then we have the example of the midwives in Exodus who wouldn't kill the baby boys, and we have Daniel who, right after they make the law that you can't pray, goes up and kneels down in front of a window and gets thrown into a lions' den, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego won't bow down to the big golden statue, and Esther is told by Mordecai, you have got to go to the king because we are all going to be killed if you don't go to the king. And she writes back and says, “You can't go to the king. It is against the law if you go to the king unbidden.” And he writes back and says, “We are going to die anyway.” And she says, “Ok, if I perish, I perish.” And she breaks the law. He mercifully raises the golden scepter, and she is spared, but she was willing to risk breaking the law for the sake of her people.

And so I think the principle is this: Citizens to governments, children to parents, wives to husbands, church members to elders, all of these are called to have an appropriate submissive spirit and to follow leadership. None of these is considered to be absolute. All of them have the lordship of Jesus riding over the lordship of the superior and, thus, defining the limits of the lordship of the superior.

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹ Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

I. Introduction

The gospel sets us free from the debt of sin, yet it binds us with a new and joyful debt: to love one another. Love fulfills the law, for in loving our neighbor we mirror Christ’s own love for us. And this obligation is urgent, for the night of sin is passing and the day of Christ’s return is near. The believer’s life, therefore, is marked by casting off deeds of darkness and putting on Christ Himself. The gospel that saved us is the same gospel that calls us to holy, love-filled lives as we await His appearing.

II. Exposition and Reflection

1. The Debt of Love (vv. 8–10)

- All commandments are summed up in love.
- Love does no wrong but seeks the good of neighbor.
 - How does love fulfill the law more fully than external obedience?
 - Who in your life do you struggle most to “owe love” to?

2. The Urgency of the Hour (vv. 11–14)

- Salvation is nearer than when we first believed.
 - Cast off works of darkness, put on the armor of light.
 - Clothe yourselves with Christ, not fleshly desires.
- How does the nearness of Christ's return shape daily priorities?
 - What does it mean to "put on Christ" in your context?

R.C. Sproul, *Romans*

In Romans 13 the apostle links the obligation of love to some of the Ten Commandments. We are not to owe anyone anything except love: For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, all are summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 9). Paul mentions the commandments often described, particularly by our Lutheran friends, as coming from the second table of the law. The Scripture refers to the Ten Commandments as being given on two tablets of stone. The first few commandments prescribe our duty and behavior with respect to God. We are to have no other gods before Him; we are not to make any graven images of Him, thereby keeping ourselves from idolatry; we are to make sure that God's name is not taken in vain; and we are to keep the Sabbath. The remainder of the Ten Commandments focuses on how we are to treat one another with respect to marriage, sanctity of life, possessions, truth telling, and the like. The first tablet of the law pertains to our obligations to God, and the second tablet, or table, pertains to our obligations to people, which is a very popular understanding of why the Ten Commandments were given on two tablets. I do not hold that position.

I think the commandments were given on two tablets due to the context in which they were given—the Mosaic covenant. In antiquity, when formal covenants were entered into, the agreement was made in duplicate. One copy was reserved for the sovereign; the other was given to the vassal. The stipulations of the Mosaic covenant were expressed in terms of the Ten Commandments, and therefore the two tablets might reflect the ancient practice of rendering two copies of the agreement. However, neither I nor my Lutheran friends know for sure why the commandments were given this way. Wherever we come out on that question, the commandments Paul mentions in Romans 13 are those that prescribe behavior on the horizontal plain—our behavior toward each other. Whoever loves another has fulfilled the law.

David Peterson, *Romans*

Previous references to the Mosaic law raise questions about its role as "norm for personal and social ethics in the redefined people of God." This passage indicates that Christians fulfill the law not by dutifully keeping its commands but by loving God and loving others. Nevertheless, the law gives both negative and positive guidelines about the practical expression of love. These are filled out and augmented in the teaching of Jesus and his apostles. Moreover, the command to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" means acting as he did to demonstrate love to perfection (Eph 5:2). The related challenge is to "discard the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light." Here the imminence of Christ's return and the expectation of living with him in his eternal kingdom is the motivation for living differently. So walking in love means adopting the pattern of life outlined in vv. 13-14, reflecting the character and will of the risen Lord Jesus. Paul's eschatological teaching means that believers have entered a new era of existence in which the conditions of the old age still hold sway, but the resources of the new age enable them to "live by its power."

Andy Naselli, *Romans*

Some people think the Bible talks about the end times primarily to specify a "train schedule" of end-times events. But the Bible talks about the end times primarily to exhort Christians to live in the present in light of the future. Here is how Paul argues in 13:11-14:

- 13:11 Reason for obeying 12:1-13:10, especially 13:8-10: It is time to wake up (i.e., stop being morally lazy) because our final salvation (i.e., when Christ returns and God glorifies us) is "nearer to us now than when we first believed."
- 13:12a Explanation of 13:11: The night is nearly gone; the day is nearly here. The day of the Lord—when Christ will return—will soon arrive (cf. Joel 2:32; 1 Cor. 3:13; 5:5; 2 Cor. 6:2; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 1 Thess. 5:2-10; 2 Thess. 2:2-3; 2 Tim. 4:8).
- 13:12b-14 Five inferences of 13:11-12a: We should live in light of Christ's impending return. (1) "Let us cast off the works of darkness" like we remove dirty clothes. (2) Let us "put on the armor [i.e., weapons] of light" (13:12b). (3) "Let us walk properly [i.e., decently] as in the daytime" (13:13)—not in the darkness of drunkenness and immoral sex and backbiting. In contrast to committing such sins, we are called to (4) "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14; cf. Eph. 6:11, 14; Col. 3:12; 1 Thess. 5:8), and (5) do not make any provision to gratify what the flesh wants.

John Gill, *Romans 13:8*

This is the only debt never to be wholly discharged; for though it should be always paying, yet ought always to be looked upon as owing. Saints ought to love one another as such; to this they are obliged by the new commandment of Christ, by the love of God, and Christ unto them, by the relations they stand in to one another, as the children of God, brethren, and members of the same body; and which is necessary to keep them and the churches of Christ together, it being the bond of perfectness by which they are knit to one another; and for their comfort and honour, as well as to show the truth and reality of their profession. This debt should be always paying; saints should be continually serving one another in love, praying for each other, bearing one another's burdens, forbearing each other, and doing all good offices in things temporal and spiritual that lie in their power, and yet always owing; the obligation to it always remains. Christ's commandment is a new one, always new, and will never be antiquated; his and his Father's love always continue, and the relations believers stand in to each other are ever the same; and therefore love will be always paying, and always owing in heaven to all eternity. But what the apostle seems chiefly to respect, is love to one another as men, love to one another, to the neighbour, as the following verses show. Love is a debt we owe to every man, as a man, being all made of one blood, and in the image of God; so that not only such as are of the same family, live in the same neighbourhood, and belong to the same nation, but even all the individuals of mankind, yea, our very enemies are to share in our love; and as we have an opportunity and ability, are to show it by doing them good.