
RESPONSIBILITIES—NOT RIGHTS

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From a Sermon Preached in the APNTS Chapel on July 19, 2001

This week, we have been discussing the upside-down world of Jesus Christ. It is described in that great Sermon on the Mount that He preached to the people at the beginning of His ministry. The only possibility for us to make that vision a reality in our lives is through the total surrender to God that is described in the twelfth chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans—as we discussed yesterday.

That holy living as Jesus described it is (1) “being before doing.” It is (2) an internalized, intensified morality; judged on the inside—a righteousness that is more difficult than that of the Scribes and Pharisees. It is (3) an *internalized* righteousness. The good things that we do must be done for the right reasons. If they are done to serve ourselves and our reputation, they are not pleasing to God. Our charity, our praying, our fasting must be done for God and for fellowship with Him. (4) We are to be servants of God alone. (5) We are to be compassionate, and not judgmental toward others. (6) We are to know that this way is possible, but that (7) it is a narrow, difficult way and few will find it. And (8) we must live so that this life is evident in our lives. We must not be wolves disguised as sheep. We must be trees bearing good fruit. We must build on the rock—and that must be evident when testing comes to our lives.

For these things to happen, we must surrender to God (1) our bodies, (2) our minds, and (3) the throne of our lives. And (4) we must dedicate to Him all of the talents and abilities He has given to us naturally or by the gifting of His Holy Spirit. (5) We must allow Him to transform the very reactions of our lives—our personalities, our

lifestyles—so that we reflect the Christ-likeness that is expected of those who bear the name of Christ. As we look at that litany of do's and don't's in the twelfth chapter of Romans, we realize that they are very different from the world; and if we live that way, we will not look like the world around us. We will be upside-down in the eyes of the world. Today's message has only one point which also serves as the introduction and the conclusion:

***The Christian way of living is not to demand my rights
but to fulfill my responsibilities.***

This is just one of those upside-down truths that Jesus and the Word of God teaches us, an inescapable truth—as I hope you will understand in a few moments—that will radically turn our lives upside-down.

I got to thinking one day that I could not recall a time when Jesus ever demanded His rights. So I sat down and read the four gospels through twice in one day, looking intentionally for any time when Jesus demanded His rights. And I could not find any. I looked into the life of Paul and realized that there was only one time (maybe one and a half) that he demanded his rights. The basic time was when he demanded his right to be tried by Caesar. And, though the ones who examined him had found no fault in him, because of his demand to be heard by Caesar, to Caesar he went—apparently—ultimately to his death.

I began to study again the gospels, the writings of Paul, and the other New Testament writers to see if they taught us to demand our rights, and I could not find any such command. However, it seems that demanding rights is a very integral part of the societies that shape us and of our natural mind-sets. Demanding rights comes naturally. Demanding rights is the essence of selfishness, and selfishness is the essence of sin.

No conflict is started over the desire to fulfill responsibilities. Virtually every conflict in the world is started over the demanding of rights. What is going on around the world today? Two peoples in the Middle East are claiming *their* rights to what we call the Holy Land. In the former Soviet Union and in the Balkans, the same conflicts are

taking place. In Ireland, it is going on. Here in the Philippians, it is happening—two groups of people demanding their right to rule, their right to space, their right to make the decisions. Look at life in the dormitory, look at it in a family, look at it in all of the situations of life—conflict arises over two people or groups of people demanding their rights to be treated in a certain way or to have things their way. But when we focus on fulfilling our responsibilities to one another, seldom, if ever, is conflict created.

I would have you notice that we are born demanding our rights. The child in the womb does nothing, and the mother does everything. She walks, she eats, she drinks, she nourishes that child for nine months. And when the child is born, he demands his rights and expects to be taken care of in every way. The child gets hungry and screams, and we rush to feed him. If he wakes up and is uncomfortable, he screams, and we try to find what is wrong. If the child needs his diaper changed, he screams, and we rush to change him and get him all fixed.

Have you noticed that infants of just a few weeks old have a built-in altimeter? They know whether you are standing or sitting. You put that child over your shoulder and you sit in a chair, and it will begin to scream and say, “Stand up!” and we stand up, and it stops. We sit down again, and it begins to scream. Even though it has not changed *its* position, somehow it knows we have become comfortable, and it demands “its rights”—and we obey. And so it goes.

The first functional words a child seems to learn in virtually every culture are “No!” and “Mine!” It begins very early. Even before they can speak, they will grasp and take away. They will resist your taking something from them—*This is mine! No! I will have it my way!*—over and over again. If we as parents give in to those demands and let them rule, we are teaching them that it is acceptable to demand their rights, and that they should expect people always to give in to what they demand.

We are born that way. We function that way as infants and children. They go to the supermarket with us and look at the Cocoa Puffs, and they want *that* cereal and not Corn Flakes, and they demand their rights and they kick and scream—and we give in!

Advertising promotes this mind-set. McDonald's used to sing, "*You deserve a break today, so get up and get away to McDonald's!*" Burger King says, "*Have it your way!*" Kentucky Fried Chicken says, "*You've got a right to chicken done right!*" One beer company says, "*Grab all the gusto you can get!*" Advertising over and over again tells us to do it! take it! be whatever we want to be—do it the way we want and take our share from society.

The great causes of the last decades have been based on demanding rights. Student rights, minority rights, women's rights, equal rights, human rights, consumer rights, gay rights, labor rights, animal rights, abortion rights, children's rights—every one of the things that gets people out on the street campaigning is a matter of demanding rights from somebody else. Yet the Bible never teaches us to do that; in fact it teaches us the opposite.

Even when it comes to Scripture, we handle Scripture on the basis of demanding our rights from it. Most of the verses we memorize are promises of God. I have had an idea for years. You know the "Little Promise Box"? You take one out in the morning and read it with breakfast and hang on to it all day. I have a project in my computer. It is all finished. There are over 600 commands in the New Testament about how we should live. I have this idea about having a "Command Box" from Jesus. Every morning you wake up and with your breakfast you take out a command like, "Don't be angry," or, "Love your neighbor," or, "Be generous with those around you," and you live by it that day. And I thought of getting the Nazarene Publishing House to produce it and sell it—but I know they will not, because it will not sell. You and I and nobody else will buy it. We want the promises, not the commands. And that is what we memorize. When we are in trouble, we go to Jesus and demand our rights: "Here's the promise, it says it right here . . . You are supposed to do this and I am here to get my fair share of Your kingdom."

Do you see how ingrained it is in us to demand our rights?

Now I am not saying that Christians do not have rights. I believe in rights. I am grateful to come from a country, like many of you do, that protects the rights of all people. I believe in those rights. I am not

saying that a Christian does not have rights. I am saying the Christian does *not* have the right to *demand* those rights.

There are a number of scriptures that speak about this:

Matthew 5:11 - When you are persecuted, you do not have the right to complain. You have the responsibility, Jesus said, to consider yourself blessed.

Matthew 5:23 - When you come to the altar and you come with your gift and with your prayers, and you realize that your brother has something against you, you do not have the right to say, "Well, he ought to come make it right." Jesus said that you have the responsibility to get up from the altar and go find your brother, and be the agent of reconciliation with him, and *then* come and present your gift to God.

Matthew 5:38-42 - Jesus said to love your enemy, go the second mile. If somebody punches you in the face, you do not have the right to punch him back; you have the responsibility to turn the other cheek. When he takes your coat, you do not have the right to take him to court; you have the responsibility to give your cloak as well.

Matthew 7:1-5 - When you see a problem with somebody else's life, you do not have the right to try to fix it; you have the responsibility, Jesus said, to look after the issues in your own life and to take care of them.

Matthew 20 - Jesus talked about the man who hired laborers in the vineyard. Some began about at six o'clock in the morning, some at ten, some at noon, some at three, and some at five, and those who only worked an hour got the same as everybody else. When those who worked all day began to demand their right for more pay than those who worked only an hour, Jesus said, "You don't have the right to demand that. If I want to be generous with everyone, I should be able to do that. You have the *responsibility* to do what you promised to do—to do a day's work for a day's wage."

Matthew 26 - Jesus was on trial. We realize that if there was ever a time when He could have demanded His rights, it was then. But He did not. An illegal trial, with lying witnesses, held in the middle of the night,

false charges, the potential of a death sentence—yet He still remained silent. He did not demand His rights.

Matthew 20, Luke 14 - James and John talked to Jesus. They thought they had the right to be Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense, to sit on the right and on the left of Jesus in the coming Kingdom. Jesus said, "I don't have the right to give that. And you don't have the right to demand it. You have the responsibility to become the slave of all!" Later, He cautioned, "Do not think you have a right to sit at the head table with all the important people. If you sit down there, somebody will come and take you out of that place and put you way at the end somewhere. You have the responsibility to take the lowest seat and not the highest one."

Luke 15 - Do you remember the story of the prodigal son? How did the younger son get into trouble? By demanding his right to his inheritance—"I want it early, I want it now, and I demand the right to do what I want with it wherever I want!" And he ended up drunk, broke, and a companion of prostitutes, finally coming home desiring only to be a servant. And then the older brother demanded *his* rights. "Why does *he* get a banquet? Why does *he* get the robe? Why does *he* get the ring and the new shoes? Why does *he* get the fancy feast? I've been faithful here all the time doing my thing. *I've* got a right to all of that first." And the father rebuked him and said, "No, you have the responsibility to celebrate the fact that your brother who was dead is alive again."

John 13 - The night that Jesus was betrayed, Peter and John, who had been given the task of preparing for that meal in the Upper Room, had failed in their responsibilities to get a servant to wash the dusty feet of those who had arrived. Jesus could have said, "You call me Master and Lord and you are right, I am. One of you go get a basin and towel and come wash my feet." He did not do that. *He* got the basin and towel. *He* went and washed their feet and said, "I am teaching you something. You are to serve one another, not lord it over each other. In the rest of the world, those who are in charge are kings; but in My Kingdom, those who are in charge must become servants."

John 15 - In those last hours with His disciples, Jesus said to them, "You don't even have the right to hang on to your life. Love one another. Greater love has no one than this, that he give up his right to his life for his friend. You are my friends." And He walked out the door to give up *His* life for them.

John 21 - Jesus says, "Peter, do you love me?" Peter says three times, "Yes, sort of." And then Jesus tells him that when he is old, he will die in a particular way. Understanding what Jesus meant, Peter says, "Well, what's going to happen to John?" (Most interpreters conclude that Peter's focus is on whether John is going to have as bad a deal as Peter is going to have—whether what happens to him is going to be better or worse than what happens to the other disciples.) And Jesus says, "That's none of your business. That's not your right to know *nor* to worry about. Your responsibility is simple: follow me."

Acts 26 - Paul makes his appeal to Caesar and demands his right and gets into trouble.

1 Corinthians 6 - Paul deals with people demanding their rights throughout a number of chapters in this letter. He talks about the fact that in Corinth, they have begun taking each other to secular court, Christian against Christian, demanding their rights from each other. And Paul says these lawsuits are out of order. He says in verse 7, "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers."

In *Chapter 7*, he talks about the rights of husbands and wives in the marital relationship, and the fact that the responsibility is not to demand one's sexual rights but to seek to fulfill the sexual responsibilities one has toward the other.

In *Chapter 8*, he talks about food given to idols, and whether or not it is right to eat such food. He says that the one for whom it is not a problem, who considers himself strong in that regard, must give up his right for the sake of his weaker brother. Look at 8:13: "Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again

so I will not cause him to fall.” Instead of demanding my right to eat meat, I will fulfill my responsibility to do without it for the good of my brother.

In *Chapter 9*, he is talking about his rights as an apostle, and he claims that he has those rights. But in verse 12, he says, “If others have the right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.” Verse 15 says, “*But I have not used any of these rights.*”

All throughout the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul (and I could also take time to show you similar passages in the General Epistles), we are taught to fulfill responsibilities, not to demand rights. The Gospel is telling us, by example in the life of Jesus and in the life of Paul, not to demand our rights. The teachings of Jesus and Paul and the others in the New Testament are telling us to fulfill responsibilities, not to demand rights. Yet here we are in our natural humanness—born, taught and trained by everything around us to demand our rights.

Let me try to make it a little more specific and plain, if I can. It begins in Ephesians 5:21: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands.” Unfortunately, in the NIV, the paragraph break comes between verses 21 and 22. The thought begins in v. 21: Submit to one another, wives and husbands, submit to one another. Wives should submit to your husbands as to the Lord.

Read that Janice, it’s right there. Did you get that? That’s for you, woman!

Oh no—I do not have a right to say that. That is not addressed to me. That is addressed to her. In some countries, you can be arrested for opening somebody else’s mail. That is not my mail.

Verse 25 - *John, love Janice just as Christ loved the Church. And give yourself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her.* All down through these verses I find my mail—that I am to love Janice with the kind of love and with as much love and concern and care as Christ has for the Church. I have the responsibility to be for her all of those things that she needs. (And it is up to *her* to listen to what God is saying to *her* about what she should do toward *me*.)

A salesman came frequently to our church in Denmark. With all the churches in Denmark, he wondered why we were there building another one, what we believed, and so forth. Part of what I tried to explain to him was the fact that we believed that the gospel was intensely relevant to how we lived our lives, and that if we lived by the Bible and put Christianity into practice, our society would be transformed. I went to this passage of Scripture and explained it to him, and I said,

“Suppose my wife and I are both living by this principle of mutual submission. Suppose we are both living by the principle of not demanding our rights from each other but of fulfilling our responsibilities to one another. Now,” I said, “suppose we have a disagreement. Maybe it is a very strong disagreement, and maybe it gets heated and we exchange words with each other and say some things we should not have said. I do not have the right to go over to that corner and say, ‘She is wrong, she knows she is wrong, and there is no use talking to her until she admits she is wrong! And when she gets good and ready to admit that, then I will talk to her. But until then, I am going to go over here and do something else.’

“I don’t have the right to do that. I have the responsibility to be the first one to go to her and to make the apologies and to build the bridge and to make things right.

“*She* does not have the right to go over to that corner and say, ‘He always thinks he is right. This is one time he is not, and I am not going to give in to him until he admits it. And I am not hungry anyway. I would like to lose some weight. He can fix his own supper tonight.’ No, she has the responsibility to beat me to being the one to build the bridge.”

And I said, “if both of us do that, what would the result be?” And my Danish friend said to me, “Oh, if everybody lived like that, arguments would not last long at all. There would not be any divorce in the world!” What a wonderful way that would be to live.

I have traveled a lot, and I have tried to bring *pasalubongs* home to Janice frequently. She is always on a diet, so I could not bring a box of

candy, and ice cream would melt (she probably would not eat that anyway). So it got harder and harder to bring something with me. I was in Chicago, I think it was, and in the airport they were selling flowers. I bought her a single, long-stemmed red rose, and took it on the plane so that when she picked me up, I could hand it to her. When I got on the plane, the stewardess said, “You’re either a thoughtful husband or you’re as guilty as sin. Something is wrong!”

Suppose I arrived home and walked in the door and said, “What happened?! You weren’t at the airport—I had to get home alone by the bus. And I don’t smell supper cooking. I’ve been traveling all day; where’s my meal?! And you should have been baking my favorite cookies or brownies or cake or something. I want to sit down and watch the football game tonight. What’s the matter with you anyway? You’ve been home all day—*haven’t you done anything?!*”

If I get a plate of cookies, it will probably be right in the face.

But suppose instead I came home and say, “I was able to get a bus and figured something was wrong—are you okay? Here is the rose I brought you. I know you’ve been busy working over at the college and taking care of the kids. I don’t have a lot of cash, but let’s go out tonight to eat. Let’s go to that ‘golden arches’ place, that fancy restaurant, and we’ll eat together. You won’t have to fix a meal and do dishes and clean up, and we’ll have some time together.” She might be so impressed she would bake my favorite cookies before the football game starts!

We all respond better to kindness than to anger. And if I devote all of my time and energy to fulfilling all of *her* rights to security, being cared for, her sexual needs, her protection—then all of her rights are cared for. And if she devotes her life to fulfilling her responsibility to me, all of *my* rights are cared for, and all of *both of our rights* are cared for—out of love, not out of demanding and selfishness and conflict.

That is what God has in mind, that we in our marriage submit to one another as if the other was the Lord, and to serve one another and to fulfill responsibilities—not to fight and fuss and fume and demand our rights from each other.

Read this throughout the whole passage and apply it to your life.

At the beginning of chapter 6, Paul writes, “Children obey your parents in the Lord.” We parents love that verse, don’t we, for our kids? But that is not my mail. Mine is, *John, as a child, honor your father and mother, and as a **father**, don’t drive your children crazy!* That is what verse 4 means in my loose paraphrase. *Don’t defeat them; instead, bring them up in the training and the instruction of the Lord.*

Then Paul turns from the husband-wife relationship and the parent-child relationship to the work relationship. He says, “Employees, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and with sincerity of heart just as you would obey Christ. Employees, obey your earthly masters, not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve them wholeheartedly as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is employer or employee, slave or free.” And every employer would say *amen* to that!

The gospel turns the world upside-down with the few words at the beginning of the next verse: “And employers, treat your employees the very same way.” You would not need a trade union if employers did.

Do you see what I am saying? Do you see what the *gospel* is saying to us? That in this one small area of life, how radically different what God expects of us is from what the rest of society tells us, what comes naturally to us? God is not content to treat us just as though we were merely forgiven. God is concerned to totally transform our lives and to turn upside-down the ways we interact with each other—as professors and students, as students in the upper bunk and the lower bunk, as persons in the dormitory whose neighbor in the next room types too late at night on a noisy, old-fashioned typewriter and likes the wrong kind of music.

It will take work to be different. It will take the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, but we will have to cooperate with Him. Paul said to Timothy, “You have to train yourself to be holy.” You will have to work at it. You have no idea what God could do if you give up your rights.

Do you remember the little boy with the lunch? Nobody else thought to bring one to the revival meeting that day, but he did. Everybody else got hungry, but he had his lunch—five loaves and two fishes. Some big guy came and wanted to take his lunch away; and he could have said, “My lunch? I’m the only one smart enough to bring one. I’ve got a right to eat my own lunch!” But he gave up his right to that lunch and a miracle occurred. Five thousand, plus women and children, were fed that day. It could not have happened unless he gave up his rights.

Peter was on the housetop in Joppa. It was noon and he was hungry. He was praying and fell asleep. A sheet came down from heaven and a voice: “Rise, Peter, slay and eat!” And he looked at what was in the sheet and said, “Oh no, Lord! Those are all unclean animals. I’ve been trained by my culture not to eat those things.” And God said, “If I call it clean, Peter, don’t you call it unclean.” And it happened a second time, and it happened a third time. Just then there was a knock at the door. Peter still did not understand the meaning of that vision, but some men came to the front door. They were Gentiles; they wanted him to go to the home of Cornelius, the Gentile. *Unclean!* To enter that home. *Unclean!* To preach the gospel to him. *Unclean!* To break bread with him. *Unclean! I don’t do that Lord!*

“But if I have called it clean, Peter, don’t you call it unclean.”

Then Peter understood the vision. He went to Cornelius and took the gospel to the Gentiles. He came back to Jerusalem and defended going to the Gentiles to the rest of the Church and prepared the way for the ministry that Paul would have to the Gentiles in the future.

There are things in your life and mine that are baggage which we carry from our cultural upbringing and from how society has formed us. Peter was already a disciple of Christ; he had lived with Him for three years. He had stumbled and fallen and gotten back up again. He had been filled with the Holy Spirit. He was mightily used of God to win thousands in a day. He had been miraculously changed by the power of the gospel. But he had never noticed that if he hung on to that cultural concept from his past, he could not be used by God the way God

wanted to use him, and the church he built would be narrow and deformed. He faced a new truth. It did not mean he was not saved; it did not mean he was not sanctified. It meant that God was trying to show him something new.

And maybe you have lived all of your life to this point demanding your rights from your parents, from others in the dorm, from your professors or your students or whoever. You have lived all of your life demanding your rights, and you never realized before how thoroughly the Scriptures teach us that *that* is not the Christian way to live.

I was praying with a lady at the altar after preaching this sermon once, and she said, "If I change . . . I mean my whole life has been the other way—my husband won't know me! Everything in my life will change if I allow God to turn this upside-down. Every relationship in my life would be different. I don't know if I have the courage to do that." But she did it.

I remember a teenager who went home after camp having allowed God to show her this new light and for her to say "yes" to it. Her parents came to me and said, "What in the world did you do to Lizbeth at camp? She's not like the teenager she used to be. She's offered to help around the house; she has been polite, her whole attitude toward us has changed!" She had let God actually turn her upside-down.

This lifestyle is only possible when you are a child of God and guilt is gone. If you are living under a burden of guilt for sin, you won't have the courage or the strength for this to happen.

This will only happen if you are filled with the Holy Spirit, and sin and self-centeredness have been purged from your life.

You can only do this if you walk daily in the light of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. You will only be able to do this if you are willing to back up, apologize, start over again and persistently pursue the goal.

I'll blow it with Janice, and I'll do it wrong. I'll have to go back quickly and say, "Janice, I'm sorry. I slipped there. I started demanding my rights again. I'm sorry. But I'm not going to give up living the way

Jesus taught us to live.” This is what it means to be measured by the fullness of Christ. This is a part of being before doing. This is Christ-likeness.

I talked to some student leaders once about it. They said, “But if I really lived like that, other people would take advantage of me. I’m not going to be somebody’s doormat. They’re not going to walk all over me. They’d just take advantage of me, and that wouldn’t be right.” I remembered that people took advantage of Jesus too. There were times when He let them walk all over Him. I had better be willing to let that happen as well, if I am going to be His disciple.

It might turn you upside-down; and you might look funny to the rest of the world; and you might spend the rest of your life going around on your head, looking the world in the ankles — but for the first time in your life you will be able to look God in the eye! If we did that, it would start a revolution on this campus that could change the world.

I dare you.