

Part 7: How We Respond

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I had to purchase something the other day which required an age verification. The lady at the counter looked at this baby face and said, "Quick: What's your date of birth?" So as I rattled off my birthday she told me that it was the simplicity of that question that often revealed people who were using a fake ID.

They were so used to just handing the ID over that when asked to respond themselves, they were caught off guard. They didn't know how to respond. They practiced keeping a game face, but never how to respond to a question as simple as that.

How we respond to things is extremely important. Whether it's the question "Will you marry me?", or "Do you know how fast you were going?" or even, "What do we do now?" our responses communicate a reality about who we are and what we know to be true.

Over the past few weeks we have been working through a series showing how the activities we do together as the church are merely an extension of how we live as Christians throughout the week. As John Bunyan called it, the Lord's Day is the "market day" for the soul where we come to fill up on all the supplies we need to obey Jesus and love others throughout the week.

As we've walked through every aspect of our Sunday services together what I hope you've noticed in this series is not only that everything we do in our body is rooted in scripture, but that everything we do is primarily a response to God's grace.

While everything we do as a church is a response to what God has already done in Jesus Christ, today we are going to talk specifically about the four responses to the gospel that we practice together regularly in our church service. Those responses are baptism and the Lord's Supper, and confession of sin and reciting the Apostle's creed. Of these four responses, two are commanded for the gathered body in scripture and the other two are clearly modeled for the gathered body in scripture.

But before we dive into those responses in particular, I want to set the stage for what Christian responses look like, and where they come from in scripture. Understanding where our responses come from, and the order in which we respond, is the biggest difference between what is often called legalism and the gospel.

This sermon is going to be a little different than our normal ones at Sovereign Hope as we are going to bounce around a bit more in the Bible than usual, however there is one text we want to key on to start for the sake of that important distinction. Over the course of the sermon we will see how we respond in **Christian baptism to mark us off, Christian communion to keep us going, Christian repentance to renew and refresh, and Christian creeds to remind and reorient.** But first, and for the overriding point we are going to see today, we are going to spend time in Romans 12:1-2 and we are going to see that **Christians respond because God's mercy draws out gospel responses.**

Perhaps you've heard the phrase, "You play how you practice." Well, part of what we do on Sundays together is to help each other practice gospel responses here, so that we play with gospel responses all week.

With that said let's look briefly at our first point today in **Romans 12:1-2**.

Here we see our first and primary point today: **Christians respond because God's mercy draws out gospel responses.**

What we see in Romans 12:1-2 is nothing short of a call to respond, and the response is life changing.

Did you notice the comprehensive nature of Paul's appeal? He wants us to present our bodies. But he doesn't stop there. He also connects our physical bodies to our spiritual or reasonable service, and the renewal of our mind. He's after what we do, who we are, and how we think.

He draws on the theme of Old Testament sacrifices when he says, "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice." There was nothing more comprehensive than a sacrifice. It literally took the life of the animal. So here, the Christian is called to give over his whole life. Though not in death, but in life!

More than this the way in which we participate in this drastic change is not a rote, ritualistic, legalistic change. It is to be reasonable, spiritual, mindful, worshipful, good, and perfect. This new life consumes the whole of who we are.

When we think of Christian conversion we often think of something like a convertible. Sure it's nice and good to have the top down, but sometimes there are days where the clouds are darker and the temp cooler and you'd rather convert that top back up and live as you used to.

But Christian conversion is not like a convertible, it's like a caterpillar changing to a butterfly. You can't go back. You aren't just an altered version of what was, you are new entirely!

Paul's big picture here is that if you are a Christian, your life is to be fundamentally different. If you look back at the text we see that our lives are given to God as a sacrifice, set apart for God as holy, for the approval of God, and for the will of God. Depending upon who you are this might seem either unattainable (I could never meet this level of change) or joyless (well I guess I have to do all this stuff if I don't want to go to hell).

But this is why we must sort out Paul's order here to help save us from legalism and show us the joy of the gospel. Most people think that the difference between legalism and gospel is style, or perhaps whether you like it or not. But the difference is actually where we place the response. Legalism says, "I do this and God responds." I say the right things, do the right steps in church, pray the right prayers and do the right rituals and God rewards my law keeping with grace.

But this gets the order of our offering wrong doesn't it. Look back at **Romans 12:1a**: "By the mercies of God present your bodies as a living sacrifice."

What are the mercies of God? Well it's everything that preceded Romans 12.

In the first 11 chapters of Romans Paul walks through the magisterially good news of the gospel. It begins in chapter one with how we are disillusioned, disobedient, dissatisfied, destined for judgement in our sins for rebelling against God and his righteous rules.

But then he shows us how Jesus, who is the second person of the Trinity, was born fully God and fully man so that he would obey God's law perfectly in our place, and die substitutionally for our disobedience so that we might be won back to God not only as servants but as sons and daughters. And how might we earn that redemption? Not by works, but by faith. Not by merit but by mercy.

More than that he repairs our paranoid and disillusioned selves not only by forgiving us, but by filling us with the Holy Spirit--the third person of the Trinity--so that he might help us live according to this new identity. As he dwells in us, and as we encounter the difficulty of putting off sin, and the pain of life in a fallen world he reminds us daily of the work of Jesus' mercy: "That nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Who might get in on this? Not simply the religious elite. Not simply the lost and burnt out. But anyone who confesses with their mouth and believes in their heart that Jesus is Lord. For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

It's in light of those mercies we respond. You see legalism says "Do this and Jesus will respond." Gospel says, "Jesus has done it and now I get to respond." Legalism makes our own actions the decisive king, the gospel makes Jesus our King and we then present everything in joyful obedience to him.

There is a beautiful tension in this passage and that is that Paul does give commands, but he doesn't start with commands. He starts with an appeal. Yes, Christians must look different. But it's because they already are different in Jesus Christ. Because of this Paul's commands for all of our life to be lived in response to Jesus Christ comes not first as an imperative, but as an appeal.

He wants us not to see the obligation of Christian living, but the privilege of it. We are won to a God so wonderful that all we want to do is orient the whole of our person to the sweetness of our king.

This response to God's mercy looks different because all of us are different. But Paul does tell us what it should look like on an ultimate scale. Look at **Romans 12:2**. We should look less like the world, and we should look more like what God transforms us to be by his grace.

What's important to see in this text is that Paul assumes each and every one of us is responding to something. We are either responding to the external patterns of our world, or we are responding to the transformative mercy of Jesus Christ. One leads us to greater joy in knowing God's purpose, one leads us back to Romans chapter 1.

Our responses to the gospel look as broad as what we watch, how we talk, how we share the gospel, how we enjoy a cup of coffee, how we view our sexuality and how we raise our kids. But for the remaining time together, having the order of response right, we want to touch on four responses we do together as a body and how we participate in them after the declaration of the gospel in the sermon.

However familiar you are with these four responses, I want you to consider them at a heart level. What's really interesting when you look at Jesus' critique of the legalistic and hypocritical Pharisees is that he very rarely criticizes what they are doing. Instead he constantly criticizes the heart in which they

are doing things—his concern was less the system and structure and more about the heart. When Pharisees acted legalistically in giving, worshipping and praying he never said, "Don't give, don't worship and don't pray." He said: "Don't do it like that."

So we want to assess these things in light of and in response to God's mercy so that we can engage with them rightly.

With that said, we are going to walk through four responses of our own spiritual worship as a body in our remaining time so that none of us might attempt to participate in them apart from God's mercy. First we respond with **Baptism to mark us out.**

We actually have the privilege of witnessing a baptism later today so it's with great anticipation we get to discuss this now.

In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded and empowered his disciples to baptize people in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It was only a short amount of days after the Great Commission and we already saw Peter applying this in the church: **Acts 2:36-41.**

So here we already see that baptism is a response to our repentance and our faith in Jesus Christ, and that baptism is part of a marking off of the church in relationship to the world. Baptized people are people who believe in Jesus Christ, have repented of their sins and who stand apart from the world.

We see this as a similar level of understanding in Paul's words in **Romans 6:1-4.**

At Sovereign Hope we baptize believers who have repented and believe in the name of Jesus Christ by immersion into water so that they might be identified not with the world, but with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And more than simply being a public profession of faith baptism is also a commitment to a Romans 12 life, it pledges that by the power of Jesus' new life, I too will walk in newness of life. Baptism is what marks us off as belonging to Jesus and to Jesus' people.

It reminds us in moments of sinful temptation or deep doubt that we have left our old hopes behind. Our hope is not in who we are anymore for we have been buried with Jesus Christ.

I often use the example of a wedding ring. Just as my wedding ring doesn't make me married, baptism doesn't make you Christian. But my wedding ring serves as a constant reminder to myself and to others to whom I belong. I belong to Sarah. Baptism makes our clothes wet for all of life. It reminds us that we belong body and soul to Jesus Christ, it is in his name we live, in his name we walk, and his glory we pursue.

Just as circumcision set apart the physical people of God in the Old Testament, baptism is what sets apart God's spiritual people in the New Testament. That's what Paul makes clear in **Colossians 2:11-12.**

So if you are someone in here today who is wondering what a first response to the gospel might be it is to believe in Jesus, repent on account of Jesus and to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. If that's you today, would you please talk to an elder before you leave!

The second clear response Jesus gives to the church is the Lord's Supper which we also call communion. This is our second response: **Communion to keep us going.**

Where baptism is a one-time even which marks out the church, the Lord's Supper is the feast we get to participate in continually.

This too was commanded by Jesus in **Luke 22:19-20.**

The Lord's Supper is the new covenant meal for God's people. What we eat is not the body and the blood of Jesus. It is wine or grape juice and crackers. There's nothing special about the elements, but there's something extremely special about the practice.

The Lord's Supper is for those who belong to God through faith. Which is why we generally ask that kids and others who take the Lord's Supper with us here at church have been baptized. If baptism is the first response to faith, the Lord's Supper is the continued response of it. Look how Paul puts it in **1 Corinthians 10:15-16.**

This cup and this bread is for those who participate in the work of Christ. What we saw already in Romans 12 is that we do not participate in the work of Christ apart from anything other than God's mercy. So the only way to rightly participate in the work of Jesus is by faith in Jesus.

As the New Covenant meal we are reminding ourselves again of two things: First we remind ourselves of the means of this covenant--Jesus and his sacrificial death in our place. But secondly we remind ourselves of the joy of the covenant--we have fellowship with God.

The Lord's Supper is often called communion because in a special way when we take this meal together we are communing with God the Father, on account of the Son, through the work of the Holy Spirit. To take this is to remind ourselves that we have fellowship through Jesus with the triune God of scripture and that he on account of his covenant is pleased to be with us.

But this communion is not limited to the individual and God, it involves a corporate fellowship as well. Paul makes it clear that this is not an individual meal. This is a meal for the gathered church. Just as Jesus took it with his disciples together, 1 Corinthians makes it clear that this was a meal to be taken when the church gathers together.

Listen to the repetition of one key phrase as Paul begins to address the practice of the Lord's Supper in the church in Corinth: **1 Corinthians 11:17-20.** What we see modeled clearly in Corinth is that the Lord's Supper is a corporate meal. It binds us not only to God, but to each other in faith.

Part of what Paul was so frustrated with in the church was that the Lord's Supper was becoming only for elite groups of people which perverted wonderfully equalizing force of the gospel where all who come to Jesus in faith are one with God and one with each other. In a world which seeks true unity it is at the table of the Lord Jesus where we show our great unity in diversity as we together participate in grace as a gathered body.

As we partake of this meal we are practicing a reminder of God's daily provision. Just as food sustains the flesh, the offering of Jesus sustains the church. It points forward to the day when the whole church

gathers in the presence of Jesus, and with one another to participate in the wedding supper of the Lamb. In this way the Lord's Supper speaks into our moment of provision and into our future hope.

These two responses we just saw are different from the two which follow. As was clear, Jesus commanded his church to participate in these two responses. In other words you cannot be an obedient church without practicing these things. It's the joyful obligation of the gathered body.

But these next two aren't as clearly commanded in scripture and so we humbly hold them a bit more loosely. However the elders have recognized the weight the Bible does place on these things and their inclusion in Sunday gatherings throughout history. And because of that we think they help us practice important responses to God's mercy as well. These final two are corporate repentance and creeds.

If there are any things in our church service that former Catholics might get PTSD over, it would be these. But again, this is why we want you to understand that we do these as a response to God's mercy. If we forget the gospel, these become odd. But when we see the beauty of God's mercy, these become natural not only in our gathered times but for our daily lives.

Let's first talk about our response of **Christian repentance to renew and refresh**.

Every few weeks we respond to the sermon by jointly reading a prayer of confession together as a body.

This is something the Bible makes very clear is part of the Christian life. It's what people were doing publicly when they came to John the Baptist to be baptized. It's what the James recommends in **James 5:16**. And what the early church did in Ephesus in **Acts 19:17-18**.

In the Old Testament we regularly see these moments of corporate confession and repentance, and throughout church history it has remained consistent in practice as well.

We practice this together because confession and repentance is the way of life. When we together confess our sins we have the wonderful privilege of de-coupling our own guilt and unleashing the grace of Jesus.

During the week there might be times where you feel that you are the only one who struggles with sin, but when we together read prayers of confession you are reminded that you are a simultaneously sinner and saint along with your other brothers and sisters. And despite the weight of sin and our ongoing fight of it, we have the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ.

The beauty of this prayer is that it can be for anyone. It is for the Christian who just like David in Psalm 32 finds relief in verbalizing his sin before God. But it is also for the person who is responding for the very first time to the gospel. We don't practice altar calls here, but we do practice calls to repent. And I can tell you on good authority that the best way to be saved is not to come to a certain place, but to confess your sins to a certain person: Jesus Christ.

That's what makes this confession different from the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church believes that you need to be forgiven every week by a priest and that the priest has the ability to forgive your sins. But Christian confession doesn't confess to a pastor, we confess to Jesus who is our high priest forever. We don't confess our sins because we worry Jesus' sacrifice wasn't enough and we need more of it. We

confess our sins because Jesus' offering was sufficient once and for all to forgive us and to help us put off sin every day.

That's why at the end of our prayer we have an assurance of pardon where we read promises not from a pastor, but from God's word that Jesus is sufficient to forgive and save those who ask in faith.

This is an important practice because it reminds others that the walk of following Jesus is difficult. There are often real setbacks and real sins. But Jesus is faithful to walk with us. It's this corporate confession which dulls the criticism of the church being full of hypocrites. It says openly and publicly, "We are not yet who we are saved to be, but by God's grace, we are striving day by day to obey Jesus."

The last response we practice together is another confession, but instead of a confession of sin it's a confession of what we believe in. **We confess the Apostle's Creed to remind and refresh.** The word "credo" simply means to confess.

What's interesting is that for many of us this practice might be the most foreign. Yet I was noticed this week that it seems to perhaps be the most common in our world.

How many of you when spelling the name of our church recite the faithful creed: I before "e" except after "c" or when sounding like "eigh" as in "neighbor and weigh." Or when tightening the nut on the engine you say: "Righty tighty, lefty losey." Or, "No creed but the Bible" (which is itself, a creed).

Or perhaps you've seen in your own neighborhoods signs that say: "In this house we believe black lives matter, women's rights are human rights, no human is illegal, science is real, love is love and kindness is everything."

Our world runs on creeds. Why? Because we know that a clear understanding of what we believe to be true is often the most helpful tool to instruct us when we are confused, lost, or just starting. While all of these examples are secular creeds, scripture is full of wonderfully gospel saturated creeds which were meant to help others in their own lives.

In the Jewish worship faithful Israelites would recite the *Shema* from Deuteronomy in their services: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

In the New Testament, Paul seems to reference similar sayings which were used by the church to teach doctrine like this in **2 Timothy 2:11-13**.

There are several times in the Pauline letters where Paul recites a clearly constructed statement of theology and then says: "The saying is trustworthy." He's packaging doctrinal truths for his people so that they can remind themselves of them.

Because our world loves to confess doctrine as well, Christians if not aware of what they believe, can often be swept away by false truth. To protect what the Bible preaches as true the historic church used creeds to help preserve the faithful. When we sing the Christmas hymn, "O Come All Ye Faithful," and together sing, "True God of true God, light from light eternal," we are singing the words of the Nicene Creed. A statement which preached the divinity of Jesus Christ in contrast with Arianism which claimed Jesus was another of God's created beings.

What we confess in the Apostle's Creed is the earliest summary of faith we have from church history. It's not exclusive to Baptists, or Presbyterians, it's exclusive to Christians. All who know this creed know the essential truths of the Christian gospel which we believe.

When my children learn Darwinian evolution in science class, they know that "We believe in God the Father almighty maker of heaven and earth." When sorrow of the death of a loved one grips our hearts "We believe in the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

When we wonder if Jesus cares at all and if he will ever act again: "The third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From thence he shall come the living and the dead."

There's a tragic story Jesus shares of a group of people who would come to him on the Day of Judgment and what they shared with Jesus was what they did: We prophesied in your name, casted out demons in your name and did mighty works in your name. But Jesus sent them away from him saying: "I never knew you."

Creeds remind us of how different our hope should be when we find ourselves before the Lord on Judgement day. We boast, we confess not in what we have done, but we confess the truth of what Jesus did.

You see when all is said and done, each of us will stand before the Lord and each of us will respond with something. We play how we practice. So together as a church we want to practice our responses of faith and repentance so that we might have confidence on that day.

There is a beautiful scene of response which is held out for all who hope in Jesus Christ in Revelation 5. In this scene the risen, resurrected Jesus is presented as the key to God's redemptive program. And in that moment, there is a group of elders who had been responding to God in worship by confessing repeatedly, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty who was and is and is to come."

And what they practiced influenced their response to Jesus. In a moment they changed their song and we read this: **Revelation 5:11-14**.

Brothers and sisters, the Christian life is a life of Christian response to this risen King. May we move forward only and always by that mercy in hopes for this great and glorious day.