

Life Group Questions

April 7th, 2024

A Life Devoted to God – Pastor Vinh Doan – **Romans 12:1-2**

Note from Pastor Jonathan

Hey Life Groups,

We're moving into a series on Romans 12-16, looking at what how we can live for God.

As always, I can't cover everything in my questions and notes. Since Romans is super deep and Paul loves to use complex grammar, I'm trying extra hard to get the questions and notes to flow smoothly and keep things focused. I'll also have to leave a lot out on the table. As a side note, I wrote a 15ish page paper on this passage back in seminary, but can't find it!

Check out COMMENTARY & NOTES to get a background and some overview of the. passage.

Pastor Jonathan Hsieh

jhsieh@willingdon.org

OVERVIEW



1. How do God's mercies lead us to sacrifice?



2. How is sacrifice a form of worship?



3. How can we know how God wants us to live?



4. How can we use our bodies to worship God?

How is it different from how the world wants us to use our bodies?



5. How does sacrificing ourselves for God impact the people around us?

QUESTIONS



1. How do God's mercies lead us to sacrifice?

Appreciation. The word mercy is οἰκτιρισμός (oik-tir-mos) in Greek, meaning “display of concern over another’s misfortune, pity, mercy, compassion” (BDAG). We all deserve God’s judgment and punishment for sin (Romans 3:23), but Jesus still died for us and took on our punishment (Romans 5:8).

I’m sure many of us have been forced to do things. Our bosses may make us work more hours without overtime. “Do you want to keep your job?” Maybe we’re guilted into sacrificing our time for someone. “Come on, I really need your help. If you don’t do it, I’m sunk.” Or we do things out of duty. “They’re your family. That’s what you’re supposed to do!”

But God isn’t like that. Yes, we are called to obey Him, but He’s given us so much we don’t deserve. He’s given us forgiveness of sins, eternal life, freedom from guilt and condemnation, the Holy Spirit, a life with Him, and more. And it’s all somehow a gift (Romans 6:23) that we can’t earn (Romans 4:4-5). Because God has already given us so much, we’re overwhelmed with gratefulness.

How does this play out? Hopefully we can live for God cheerfully! Reading our Bibles, loving our neighbors, sacrificing our money for church ministries, worshipping in song, forgiving others, and so on shouldn’t be obligations. They should be wonderful opportunities to show appreciation. “Thank You, God, for giving me so much! I know it’s not much compared to what You gave me, but here’s something I’ve done for you!”

Not to earn. One of the most terrifying things about a works-based religion is that there’s no way to know if you’ve done enough. Do my actions even count towards my balance? What if I do something bad before you die to tip the scale back to the wrong side?

Paul writes that the Israelites/Jews thought they could be good enough to earn God’s favor and love. Legalists made tons of laws around God’s law to make sure people followed everything. But looking through Israel’s history, it never worked. Because of their sinfulness, they could never reach God’s righteous and holy standard (Romans 3:23). Besides, what could make up for crimes against a holy God?

But praise God that Jesus lived a perfect life and earned all the good stuff we couldn’t earn. Praise God that if we believe in Jesus, He gives us forgiveness and all the blessings He earned. Jesus already gave it to us, so why do we try to earn it?

How does this play out? A lot of us may be guilty of trying to do good stuff to earn God’s love. That creates pressure! “I *have* to read three Bible chapters and pray an hour a day.” “If I don’t do enough, God will be angry with me.” We do and do and do but forget to rest in Him. We feel guilty because others are serving more than us. We burn out because we’re burdened to reach some impossible standard.

Since we can’t earn God’s favor, we can rest in God and ask Him what we *get* to do, not *have* to do.



2. How is sacrifice a form of worship?

Worship is ultimately demonstrating through our words and actions the value of something or someone. The Olympics are coming up, and I enjoy learning athlete stories. “Ever since they were two years old, Sportsman has spent 25 hours a day training.” “As parents, we wanted what’s best for little Athletegirl

so we spent \$5 gadjillion a year to send her to the best trainers and buy the best equipment.” Whenever I hear that, I think, “Wow. What a sacrifice! This sport must really be important to them!”

By observing God’s laws, the Israelites demonstrated God was greater than other gods and His ways were better. By sacrificing tons of animals, King David demonstrated that God’s blessings were worth all the animals he was giving up. By removing all the idols for other gods, King Josiah got rid of all the idols, demonstrating that only God deserves to be worshipped (2 Chronicles 34:33).

Paul writes that offering our bodies as living sacrifice is our worship. The way we live our lives demonstrates how we view God. If we legitimately believe God is that great, we will want to use our bodies for Him. And when we do, the people around us will also say, “Wow. This Jesus guy must really be important to them!”



3. How can we know how God wants us to live?

How do we know how we should be different? Should go Amish? Sell our cars and buy horse-buggies, trade our Kirkland Signatures for 1700s fashion, and disconnect our BC Hydro? How do we decide what’s appropriate for our children to wear? Or what movies to watch?

Check out DISCERNMENT in the COMMENTARY & NOTES for real-life examples of these extremes.

Be Aware of the World. We’re surrounded by non-Christians (1 Corinthians 5:10). If we’re not careful, we’ll be shaped by the world.

Paul writes “do not be conformed.” The Greek word is *συσχηματίζω*, meaning “to form according to a pattern or mold, form/model after” (BDAG). The verb is present passive imperative. The image Paul has in mind is the world continually trying to squeeze and shape us into their mold. We don’t need to be experts, but we should be aware of what’s going on around us.

Social media tells us the latest trend to fit in. I used to do youth ministry. Many leaders just adopted what the world did with some minor tweaks to make it Christian.

Our peers or classmates may encourage us to just do the bare minimum to pass. If we’re not careful, we’ll aim for the floor, too. We’ll do only the basics to “be Christian”.

Cultural norms tell us what’s right or wrong, but if we aren’t careful, we’ll end up promoting an earthly culture instead of God’s kingdom culture. Our cultures may promote shame over grace or individualism over community. Western culture tells us not to yuck someone’s yum, but we should let God decide what’s right or wrong. In Canada and the US, many churches fought hard to keep churches European in style and demographic. Culture is strong.

There’s some good stuff out there, but also a lot of bad. We need to be aware, otherwise it shapes us.

Renew Our Minds. Instead of letting the world shape us, Paul writes for us to “be transformed.” The Greek word is *μεταμορφώω* (met-am-or-fo-o, where we get metamorphosis), meaning “to change inwardly in fundamental character or condition, be changed, be transformed” (BDAG). This is also present passive imperative. Paul’s saying, “Don’t sit back and let the world shape your thinking. Instead, give yourself to God and let Him change your brain.” It’s not about us changing our own minds, but about who we let shape our thinking.

As Pastor Vinh said, the Holy Spirit is key here. So, something we need to do is pray. Pray for God to work in our minds. Pray for God to make us aware of what's trying to shape us.

Study God's Word! Dig in. The world is telling us about sex and gender. Are you looking at what God says about it? The world is telling us life what gives life value, but do you know what God says? We don't need to be a scholar, but we do need to read God's Word and meditate on it. Let it sink in and shape our brains. WSBM (<https://willingdon.org/wsbm>) and Discovery (<https://willingdon.org/discovery>) are a great way to grow in this way.

Most people spend a lot of time being influenced by non-believers. Work, school, social media, friends. Are we making sure we're shaped by Christians?

♥ 4. How can we use our bodies to worship God? How is it different from how the world wants us to use our bodies?

Here are some suggestions. Please come up with some that work for you!

Eyes.

- **Read/Watching.** We live in an incredible era of things to read and watch. There are over 2 million books published a year! TV, Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO Max, Apple TV, YouTube, TikTok, and more are just a click away.

The obvious thing to do is read the Bible or other books that encourage your relationship with God (check out some of our Pastors' Picks in the Resource Center). Watch Christian videos or movies that build you up.

While the world reads and watches for entertainment, we can use a Christian filter. How are the characters similar or different to Jesus (e.g., loving/hateful, compassionate/cruel, sacrificing/selfish)? What worldview does this book/movie endorse (e.g., life is all about pleasure, you're alone in the world, there's a greater power out there)? Where does it get things right or wrong? How does it help me understand the struggles people face? How can I use this to connect with other people?

- **Look.** Do our eyes lead us toward God? It's so easy to look at what other people have (clothes, homes, technology, fit bodies) and obsess over wanting them. Or we see people through the lens of what they can do for us. I can use him to help me get a promotion or use her to get homework help. I can use these customers to meet my quotas. I can use this cute girl/guy to satisfy my sexual needs.

My family lives in Port Moody, and I always love seeing the mountains and the inlet. It reminds me how amazing God is. Because we only have one car, I occasionally use public transportation. Sometimes God moves me to pray for the people I see on the Skytrain or bus. In my many interactions with people on Sundays, I try to see how I can love people. Sad and need comfort? Overwhelmed and need a helping hand? Lost and need to be welcomed?

Many people have thanked me for my work as the Life Group pastor. They think I've got it all down. In

reality, a lot of the good stuff I've done is from I learned by *looking* at what God is doing through our amazing leaders.

Ears. Do we filter what we hear? A lot of the reading/watching and looking from eyes applies here.

Mouths. Here are some ways **we can love God and others with our words.**

- **Involve Others.** I'm sure we've been around people that only talk about themselves. What they want to do or eat or watch. What they think about a controversial topic. What they're going through. After they're done, they don't have time for others to chime in. Let's use our mouths to love. What would you like to do? How do you feel about this? That's what I think, but how about you? This lets others know they're also valuable. It also opens up conversations where you can care.
- **Pray.** If you're like me, you can get into a negative spiral. It's easy to complain. But God wants us to pray! When you're in a pickle, ask God for help. When your friend is struggling with a difficult co-worker, don't pile on the hate. Ask if you can pray for your friend and that person.
- **Build Up.** Not everyone is called to be a preacher or teacher. And that's fine! But we can all build up others with our words. We can tell others what God's been doing. "God showed me this in my Bible reading." "I've been praying for my neighbor, and God finally brought them to church!" "Here's something I learned from today's sermon."

Hands. Hands can represent serving. It doesn't have to literally be our hands. People often serve themselves, but we can serve others.

A lot of what happens on Sunday morning is behind the scenes. We saw the huge choir and orchestra on Easter Sunday, but it took a team to set up all the equipment, control the projectors, adjust audio levels, control the cameras, and more. Our café has a team in the kitchen cooking and serving food. For our food drives, people must collect and move donations. We need people patrolling the halls downstairs to keep our children safe. There are so many ways you can serve! <https://willingdon.org/volunteer>

Bodies. God has given us amazing bodies, but why should we take care of them? For many, our bodies are a way to draw attention. Toned glutes, huge biceps, or abs more shredded than lettuce get the opposite gender notice you or make your peers jealous. Or we take care of our bodies to do what we want, such as sports, dance, or hobbies.

We can remember our bodies are gifts of God, so we take care of them for His sake. It's not wrong to look good or to be fit, but it's wrong when we forget our bodies were made by and for God.



5. How does sacrificing ourselves for God impact the people around us?

It can show them there's something more to life than what the world has to offer. There's so much outer beauty out there, but inner beauty stands out. When someone uses their eyes, ears, mouths, and hands to care, people notice. When we're more excited to place our bodies in a room to worship God

instead of sleeping in bed, going on a hike, or having brunch with the ladies, we tell people that God is worth it.

COMMENTARY & NOTES

BACKGROUND TO ROMANS

Here's a six-minute video that explains the background of the letter: <https://youtu.be/RamYW-pugk> and a longer video series that summarizes the letter: https://youtu.be/ej_6dVdJSIU.

This letter is addressed “[t]o all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (Romans 1:7). Many of Paul’s letters were to churches he founded (Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica,). You can see Paul’s intimacy and passion for those churches in his letters. He really loves them! He also wrote two letters to churches he didn’t start: Rome and Colosse. He hadn’t been to those cities, and they didn’t have video chat or Zoom so he was writing to strangers he never met. His letters are still full of love because Paul sees them as His brothers and sisters in Jesus.

We don’t know when Christianity arrives in Rome. It likely begins with Jews turning to Jesus with non-Jews joining. It’s kind of cool that we don’t know who started the church, because it’s proof that Jesus doesn’t just use “famous” Christians to expand His kingdom. There was a tradition that Peter founded the church in Rome, but the evidence doesn’t support that.

Jews often became angry at the spread of Christianity because they saw Jesus as a false teacher who didn’t follow the law of Moses (including letting Jews hang out with non-Jews). We have a few examples in Acts when Jews violently tried to stop Christianity (Acts 17:1-9, 12-13; 18:12-17; 21:27-36; 23:12-15). There were also non-Jews who used violence to try and stop Christianity because it took away from worshipping their gods (Acts 18:21-41).

Although Christianity is nowadays seen as distinct from Judaism, it wasn’t supposed to be that way. Jesus was a Jew who came to fulfill the promises God made to the Jews. But Jews who rejected Jesus saw them as a heretical cult, kind of like how we would look at Mormonism or Jehovah’s Witnesses. Back then, the Roman government saw all this rioting and violence as a bunch of Jewish religious infighting (e.g., Acts 18:12-15). Since riots can cause lots of damage and lead to political instability, Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome in A.D. 49.

Divus Claudius 25 — Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.

In Acts 18:1-3, Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth because they were kicked out of Rome. During the ban, non-Jewish Christians still do Christianity in Rome, but because they aren’t Jews, they don’t follow Jewish rules, like keeping Sabbath or getting circumcised. The church becomes more Gentile in flavor.

In A.D. 54, Emperor Claudius dies, so Jews can come back to Rome. In Romans 16, Paul writes a big list of shoutouts which includes Aquila and Priscila (Romans 16:3-4), indicating they returned to Rome.

The Jewish Christians come back and are unhappy the non-Jewish Christians aren’t observing Jewish rules. So, Paul writes this letter to help them find harmony and unity in Jesus.

This letter is dated to between A.D. 55 and A.D. 58, likely while Paul is in Corinth (around 25ish years after Jesus' death and resurrection). Paul eventually visits Rome in around A.D. 62.

CONTEXT TO ROMANS 12:1-2

Romans is incredibly dense, so I'm just going to cover go over some of the relevant material for this passage. Here's a longer summary of the sections in this letter: <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-romans>.

Paul writes that the people of God are like branches attached to a vine. Many Israelites were broken off because they didn't follow God. God then chose Gentile branches and grafted them onto the vine. Grafting is taking a branch from one plant and connecting it to another plant. The new branch becomes part of the new plant. (Check out this video grafting grape vines and see an EPIC mustache: <https://youtu.be/8Ja1mx fz-K4?si=DVlBlqFPoAeuzxa4>). Both natural and grafted branches receive the nutrients and support from the vine.

Paul warns the Gentiles to not get cocky. God can remove them for the same reason He removed the Jews. If they disbelieve God, God will cut them off, too. In my Bible reading, I just finished the book of Joshua. This reminds me of God telling the Israelites that He made room in Canaan not because the Israelites were good, but because the Canaanites were evil (Deuteronomy 9:4-6). The Israelites were tempted to think that they earned it, but God constantly warns them that if they do the same bad stuff as the Canaanites, God will kick them out, too.

COMMENTARY

Chapter 12 begins the next section in Romans.

BECNT Romans — Romans 12:1–2 serve as the paradigm for the entire exhortation section (12:1–15:13). If all the exhortations contained here could be boiled down to their essence, they would be reduced to the words: Give yourselves wholly to God; do not be shaped by the old world order, but let new thought patterns transform your life. The subsequent context (12:3–15:13) fleshes out the nature of this dedication in concrete ways.

Although in English brothers refers to male siblings, in Greek and other languages mixed gender plurals use the male version of the word. For example, in Spanish hermano is brother and hermana is sister, but hermanos could mean brothers or brothers + sisters. It's the same idea in Greek.

People love to divide themselves up into different tribes. Reading through the New Testament, you can see that people loved making divisions. Economic tier (rich/poor), social standing (free/slave), who they followed (Jesus/Paul/Peter), spiritual gifting. In the context of this passage, there people divided themselves up between Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles). But Paul reminds them all that they are family. Although the Gentiles are adopted, they all still have the same Father.

We are also brothers and sisters in Jesus. Whether we're Jewish, Canadian, Russian, Latin American, or Thai, we are all one family. Every Christian at Willingdon Church and beyond is family. That means we all have the same call.

Paul doesn't just address S-Tier Christians or pastors or Super Spirituals Saints. He appeals to all of us who belong to Jesus.

DISCERNMENT

There's a Christian college that's well-known among the very conservative in Florida. They're infamously legalistic. Their student handbook (<https://static.pcci.edu/PCC/Handbook/PCC-Student-Handbook.pdf>) has plenty of rules that make sense, but plenty more that are over the top. For example, their rules on clothing and appearance are there because "The College has applied these guidelines in an effort to align with the spirit and intention of biblical principles, reflect conservative values, and to express the principles of modesty, distinction, and appropriateness." Here are their guidelines for men's facial hair.

Facial Hair

- Must be fully grown in and groomed to remain defined and of uniform length, between 1/4 and 1/2 inch, and may not be scruffy, unkempt, patchy, or thin.
- Sideburns may not extend past the bottom of the ear.
- Cuts such as thin lines along the cheekbones and around the chin or lip are not permitted
Mustaches may not extend below the upper lip or the corners of the mouth.
- Goatees and beards must be symmetrical, connected to an appropriately grown mustache, and trimmed an inch above the Adam's apple.

Plan to start growing facial hair during Christmas or summer vacations as it must meet the guidelines listed below when checking in. Those who cannot meet the standard will be asked to remain clean shaven.

Here is an excerpt on their rules about music.

Certain types of music that are typically not associated with sensual or inappropriate themes and are generally acceptable include classical and semi-classical, traditional and patriotic, concert and marching band, and hymns and choruses. Such music builds an appreciation for beauty, does not desensitize to worldly living, and can be capable of turning hearts toward the things of Christ.

Any music that promotes worldly values or associations in its lyrics or style should be avoided. Whether or not the lyrics are Christian, music in the style of contemporary Christian, country, jazz, rock, rap, R & B, or pop is prohibited and may not be listened to on or off campus.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are Christians who selectively pick and choose what to affirm.

For example, the United Church of Canada "welcome[s] into full membership and ministry people of all sexual orientations and gender identities." (<https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/being-community/gender-sexuality-and-orientation>).

What do these kinds of rules on either extreme say about their view of God?