

# Life Group Questions

April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024

**Act Differently Towards Others** – Pastor Ray Harms-Wiebe – **Romans 12:9-21**

## Note from Pastor Jonathan

Hey Life Groups,

We've been in situations with people who are hurting. Our children get bullied, spouses get laid off, friends experience heartbreak, or Life Group members receive a shocking diagnosis. Sometimes I know what to say and do, but there have been plenty of times I'm at a loss for words. Thankfully, our church is having a training to equip us to help. The event is called *You Can Counsel – Basic Training for Helping Those Who Are Hurting* (<https://willingdon.org/events/you-can-counsel-basic-training-for-helping-those-who-are-hurting/>). It's on May 11 from 9 am to 12 pm and it's FREE, but you must register. Check the link for more details.

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## OVERVIEW



**1. Can you be a faithful Christian without loving the people around you?**



**2. How have you experienced genuine love?**



**3. What makes love genuine?**



**4. Which commands are easiest for you and which are hardest?  
What makes them easy or hard?**



**5. What opportunities do you have to obey Paul's commands?**

## OPENING QUESTIONS



### 1. Can you be a faithful Christian without loving the people around you?

I served at a church with an emotionally distant pastor who said, "I don't do visitations unless you're dying or having a baby." We were the only pastors for a few years, but he never talked to me except to ask about the Wi-Fi. I'm assuming he was a good preacher (I don't know because he spoke Mandarin), but all I remember was his coldness.

At another church, there was a pastor who struggled with preaching. The church got him lots of books on preaching, signed him up for preaching classes, and more. He still struggled. I thought I was way better. People often said they liked my preaching and teaching more than his!

But when I planned events, literally nobody came. When he opened his home, *everyone* came. Why? He genuinely loved the congregation. He was a real humble, caring guy. Maybe he didn't do a good job preaching, but he took care of them in many other ways. Paul writes that we can be the smartest, the best speakers, or the most sacrificial, but without love, it's nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Many think the most important rules for Christianity are going to Sunday service, not having sex out of marriage, or being a good person. But Jesus tells us the two most important laws.

**Matthew 22:36–40** – "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And [Jesus] said to him, "You shall **LOVE** the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall **LOVE** your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Jesus says the two most important laws are to love God and love the people around you. In fact, the Old Testament (Law and Prophets) exists to explain loving God and neighbors.



### 2. How have you experienced genuine love?

Share some stories! You'll probably hear about parents, teachers, pastors, neighbors, friends, and more. Let me know of any that stood out to you! Email them to me at [jhsieh@willingdon.org](mailto:jhsieh@willingdon.org).

#### Romans 12:9–21

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine.

Abhor what is evil;  
hold fast to what is good.

<sup>10</sup> Love one another  
with brotherly affection.

Outdo one another in showing honor.

<sup>11</sup> Do not be slothful in zeal,  
be fervent in spirit,  
serve the Lord.

<sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope,  
be patient in tribulation,  
be constant in prayer.

<sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints  
and seek to show hospitality.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you;  
bless and do not curse them.

<sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice,  
weep with those who weep.

<sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another.

Do not be haughty,  
but associate with the lowly.

Never be wise in your own sight.

<sup>17</sup> Repay no one evil for evil,  
but give thought to do  
what is honorable in the sight of all.

<sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you,  
live peaceably with all.

<sup>19</sup> 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."

<sup>20</sup> 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."

<sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil,  
but overcome evil with good.

## LET'S DIG IN



### 3. What makes love genuine?

In this passage, I can see a few things that work together to make love genuine.

**Consistent.** The original Greek word for genuine is a combination of a negative prefix (ἀν) and hypocrite (υπόκριτος). Paul literally says “let love be unhyppocritical”.

In Paul’s time, the term hypocrite was for an actor on stage playing a role. They’re pretending to be someone on stage for everyone to see. That guy everyone’s looking at isn’t really the god Zeus and Anthony Hopkins doesn’t actually eat peoples’ livers (I hope).

Although it’s easy to recognize actors are acting, the line gets blurry. We’re bombarded by influencers pretending to live rich (<https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/02/hbo-fake-famous-how-instagram-influencers.html>) or look a certain way (<https://www.boredpanda.com/instagram-vs-reality-fake-pics/>), but it’s all fake!

This also applies to our character. For example, Jesus calls out the Pharisees many times because they acted like they loved God in public. They looked like they happily gave to God and took praying seriously. People were fooled into thinking that was what real followers of God looked like, but Jesus saw they were inconsistent. Their outside didn’t match their inside. They didn’t care about God because they just wanted people’s recognition (Matthew 6:1-18). There have been lots of scandals of Christian leaders who pretended to be devout, loving, and kind on stage, but abusive and terrible in private.

So for love to be genuine, it’s consistent. It doesn’t turn on and off. It’s not just done as a show or for recognition.

**Multifaceted.** Paul’s multifaceted idea of love stood out to me. He paints a picture of love that encompasses Christians (saints) and non-Christians (persecutors), good times (rejoice) and bad (weep), using words (bless) and actions (feed), what we shouldn’t do (be slothful) and what we should (be fervent), the outside community (harmony with one another) and inside your own home (show hospitality).

When I think of genuine love, I think of love that’s robust and thorough. It comes through in many ways. On one hand, it may sound like a burden. “Ugh, I have to do all those things?” But it can be liberating. Last week’s sermon and the passage right before this involved spiritual gifts. Paul wrote that each Christian has their own unique gifts. Since genuine love can be shown in so many ways, every person can use their gifts to love in their unique, God-given way.

When I was fresh out of seminary I started working at a Chinese church as a youth minister. Soon after I joined, the English pastor over me moved across the country to be closer to his ailing father and the young adult ministry migrated to another church. I lacked spiritual leadership and peers.

But God provided Mr. Lam as my youth deacon. His family immigrated a few generations ago to Georgia, so imagine a tall middle-aged Chinese man with a *thick* country accent. He used to say, “Jonathan, if you think I sound like a redneck, you should meet my cousins who grew up in the swamps!”

Mr. Lam was trained as an engineer, not in theology, so he couldn’t discuss heady spiritual topics. But he was invaluable for my ministry. He would make sure the church knew the work I put into the youth

ministry (show honor). When people gossiped about me, he would say, “Jonathan, they don’t know what they’re talking about. I was there and I know what they’re saying is nonsense.” But sometimes he would tell me, “Jonathan, people are not happy about this. You gotta work on that.” I could see the genuine care when he spoke to me. He wasn’t treating me like a church employee but like a younger brother.

Since I was single, I struggled a lot with loneliness. I remember nights when Mr. Lam would invite me over and offer a huge pot of his homemade jambalaya (show hospitality). I’d be scarfing bowls while he sat there and listened to my struggles, often late into the night. There were many nights when he gave me a much-needed shoulder to cry on (weep with those who weep).

He was always so humble (not haughty). He used to tell me, “Jonathan, after you’ve thanked someone. Thank them again!” I thank God for Mr. Lam. I should thank God again.

**Unnatural.** If it was natural, Paul wouldn’t need to write about it! Paul never tells the church to breathe or eat, because everyone does automatically. We also naturally love people who love us (Matthew 5:43-48) or only when it’s convenient. We’re naturally self-serving and our love is fickle, changing based on what we’re feeling.

Because it’s unnatural, we need Jesus’ **example** to show us what genuine love looks like. Jesus blessed His murderers (Luke 22:43), spent time with the poor and sick (Matthew 14:14), and overcame humankind’s evil by sacrificing Himself (John 1:29). He even lovingly sacrificed Himself for people who didn’t deserve it (Romans 5:8). We love as a response to God’s mercy toward us (Romans 12:1). We can’t have genuine love without looking at Jesus’ example.

Because it’s unnatural, we need God’s **empowerment**. Seeing Jesus’ example isn’t enough, because even the Pharisees saw what Jesus did. We naturally all fall short of God’s idea of genuine love (Romans 3:23), so we deserve God’s punishment (Romans 6:23). If we think we can obey God’s commands on our own, our sinful hearts are experts at twisting a good thing into a bad thing (Romans 7:7-11). But when we believe in Jesus, we can be saved from our sin and our punishment (Romans 10:8-10). God gives us the Holy Spirit so we can be shaped by Him (Romans 8:5-9). He enables us to love in a way that is naturally impossible for us.

#### ♥ 4. Which commands are easiest for you and which are hardest? What makes them easy or hard?

Share which are easy and which are hard. I bet you’ll get some surprises! Here’s my answer.

God’s helped me to be better at showing honor. I used to hoard recognition for myself. I was worried that if I gave other people too much credit, I wouldn’t get enough credit. They would be admired, and I would be left behind. God’s helped me see that all my successes are the result of Him working in/through me and others. For example, I’ve gotten a lot of good feedback on my questions and notes. But I couldn’t do it all on my own. What I am now is shaped by growing up in a Christian home, being taught by amazing seminary professors, and attending churches filled with loving people. And now I get feedback from Life Group leaders and members, Pastor Vinh, and others. My applications and ideas are often inspired by talking to lots of people at church. I put in a lot of work, but I can’t take all the credit.

Off the top of my head, something that makes following these commands hard is simply being overwhelmed. I have a lot of responsibilities including loving my wife, taking care of my baby, and pastoring (writing questions, processing leader applications, developing new member signups, making videos, connecting with other ministries, developing other plans/processes, building relationships with lots of people, and more). I enjoy it all and I wish I could do more of everything, but I have limited time and emotional capacity. I'm always thinking, "I want to do this and talk to them and work more on that, but I can't fit everything."

I often feel bad because I couldn't talk enough to someone or do another pass on my questions. One of my regular prayers is for God to help me sort out what/who I should prioritize and help me to meaningfully love and serve them. I'm a finite human being, so I can't do everything, so I do need God's wisdom to know what He wants me to do.

I also got to admit I'm not good at being patient. I can easily get frustrated when things get crazy or I feel overwhelmed. Combined with inconsistent sleep for almost two years (Why did God create baby sleep regressions? Or is it a result of the fall?), God's been showing me I'm not that strong. It's pushed me to pray more. I've been praying for God to help me trust that He's in control and for His strength to be made perfect in my weakness (2 Corinthians 12:6-10).



#### **5. What opportunities do you have to obey Paul's commands?**

Look over the list of commands and think of who you can love. Are there members in your Life Group you should honor and acknowledge (hopefully y'all identified some spiritual gifts last week!)? Has God called you to any tasks that you've been procrastinating on? Are there any singles or new people you should invite for dinner/jambalaya? Do you have neighbors you can build harmony with over a playdate or a picnic? Do you have any enemies you should pray for? Does anyone in your life need someone to share a good cry?

Some of you may have an immediate answer while others may need some time. Let the ones with answers go first. Hopefully, it'll inspire the people having trouble. And if someone can't think of anything, take a moment to pray that God will show them.

And if you know what you should do, but are finding it hard, you're in good company. Don't feel discouraged! We all struggle. Share your struggle with the group and pray together.

## BREAKING IT DOWN

**Themes.** It's a big list! If you're like me, you like to find patterns to organize your thoughts. Here are a few color-coded themes I found.

Love Instead of Hate

Meeting Physical Needs

God

Being with Others

Eagerness

Being Flexible

Evil vs. Good

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