

# Life Group Questions

May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024

**Citizens of Heaven** – Richard Young – **Romans 13:8-14**

## Note from Pastor Jonathan

Hey Life Groups,

We're fast approaching summer when many Life Groups take a break. I want to know two things from y'all:

- A) How have you seen God at work in your group? Answered prayers? Are people growing deeper in their relationship with God? Evangelism leading to belief?
- B) What does your group need from God? Do you need His encouragement? Maybe hearts convicted to grow? Or directions to know where your group can serve?

Send me an email to let me know!

Pastor Jonathan Hsieh  
[jhsieh@willingdon.org](mailto:jhsieh@willingdon.org)

## OPENING QUESTIONS (Pick 2 or 3)

### 1. Is it harder to follow individual laws or to love?

As someone who works in a church, it can be hard to love, mostly because there are so many people I interact with. Of course, I'm not going to murder or steal on Sunday morning (Pastor Vinh's my team lead and I don't want to become a sermon illustration for that). In all seriousness, I wish I had more time to sit with and care for people, develop systems and support for Life Groups, and more. But I'm finite.

With others, like my son, because I only have one. I can pour more into him and go above and beyond what's the minimum.

### 2. When you gather with other Christians, do you look forward to loving others or being loved more?

Coming to this Life Group meeting, were you thinking more about what you would get out of it or about what you could do for others? It's probably not an all-or-nothing, so what's the split? 30/70? 40/60? 99.9999/0.0001?

How about on Sunday morning? Or when you attend a men's, women's, or UNITE fellowship?

There isn't a specific ratio you need to have. We all get to a place where we're completely deflated and need to receive. Other times, we're riding high on the hog and have plenty of love to give. Most of the time we're somewhere in between. Hopefully, your expectation is a mix of loving and being loved.

### 3. How do you act differently in private versus public? Why?

This can be a fun question to get things going. Don't be too serious. Maybe you freely pass gas or pick your nose in private. (Guys know what I'm talking about. Be honest.) You got to do it, but you don't want to gross anyone out!

Or you speak a different language at home than outside, because your language isn't common here. Or you're like me, and you tend to act weirder when nobody's watching because you catch a case of weirdemia.

### 4. How would you live differently if you knew you were being watched?

Have you ever been in a store and noticed a security guard eyeing you? Does your conversation change when you realize Pastor Ray is ten feet away from you in the lobby? "So last night I was watching the LA Rams ... uh ... horns were used as trumpets in ancient Israel called shofars." What changes in your behavior and why? Maybe you sit up a little straighter and touch your phone less when your manager shares a desk with you because you want them to think (know?) you're a hard worker. Or you pay more attention to the lecture when you're in a smaller classroom and the professor is right in front of you.

## Romans 13:8-14

<sup>8</sup> Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

<sup>9</sup> 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."

<sup>10</sup> Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup> But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

## LET'S DIG IN

### 5. Why do we owe love?

In the previous verses, Paul tells his readers to give what they **owe** to the government, namely money and respect/honor (Romans 13:7). Now he tells us what we **owe** each other. The word owe is ὀφείλω (of-i-lo) meaning “to be under obligation to meet certain social or moral expectations, owe” (BDAG).

On one hand, it seems like we're off the hook! “I'm under obligation to give the government what I'm obligated to give, but I'm not obligated to owe you anything!” But Paul gives one exception: **love**. This connects back to Romans 12:9 when he tells us to let love be genuine.

**It's the Law.** If we just love, we will fulfill the entire law. Paul says the same thing in Galatians 5:14 (compare James 2:8). When a religious leader asked Jesus which law was the most important, Jesus said, “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.” (Matthew 22:35–40). Both Jesus and Paul agree that everything in the Bible exists to help us love by teaching the why, what, and how of love.

Researching for these notes, I was surprised to see some variation of loving others as yourself exists in some form in almost every major religion ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\\_Rule](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule)). I was initially confused because I thought Christianity was special. But as I thought about it, I realized it showed how God had put this truth into everyone's hearts (Romans 1:19-20). It's part of being God's image bearer (Genesis 1:26-27). Everyone knows they should treat others the way they want to be treated. It also reveals mankind's sinful nature, because everyone knows how to love but refuses to do it!

**Jesus loved us first.** When God first called His people to love Him and others, it was in response to His love for them (Deuteronomy 6:4; Leviticus 19:18). God had picked a random old couple (Abram and Sarai), gave them a son (Isaac), and multiplied them into a nation (Israel). It was all God-initiated love.

Likewise, we are all born in sin. We naturally disobey God's laws. We commit adultery when we fantasize about that cute guy in the office (Matthew 5:28), commit murder when we say hurtful things to our spouse (Matthew 5:21-22), steal when we fudge on our taxes (Romans 13:7), or covet when we stare too long at all the cool stuff other people have that we don't. These are all bad because they're not loving people or God their Creator! They're selfish and about what we want.

Because we all break God's laws, we **owe** God a debt. But there is no way we can pay God back to make things right, so we all deserve to be punished (Romans 6:23). He knew this, so Jesus paid the price for us (Romans 5:6-11). Jesus came to earth as a human being, perfectly demonstrated how to love God and people, and died on the cross. While on the cross, He paid what we **owed** to God.

God wants us to pay His love forward (15:12-16). Now we **owe** love to the people around us. Love is the hallmark feature of followers of Jesus (John 13:34).

**Active.** Once someone asked a famous Jewish teacher named Hillel to teach the entire Law of God (Torah) while he stood on one foot. Hillel said, “That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study.” (Shabbat 31a). It's a similar idea to what Jesus and Paul say, but I find it lacking. If fulfilling the law is simply *not* doing bad stuff to others, then I could do a pretty good job if I lived in a cave by myself.

But we're called to love. The verb love here is ἀγαπάω (ag-ap-ah-o), where we get agape, meaning "to have a warm regard for and interest in another, cherish, have affection for, love" (BDAG). When I love someone, I have their interests in mind. I'm wondering how I can meet their needs.

Again, Jesus perfectly exhibits this. John 3:16 states that God loved (agape) the world so much that He sent His Son. He saw our need for forgiveness so He gave up His life. This is the same word for love when Paul tells husbands to love their wives (Ephesians 5:25, 28, 33; Colossians 3:19), how Jesus loves the church (Ephesians 5:25), and how Jesus wants us to love each other (John 15:12).

## **6. What can you do to put love into action?**

Like I shared earlier, I can't love everyone around me! It's impossible. A few hundred people live in my building. I see hundreds of people on my daily commute or when I buy groceries. Thousands of people worship with us on Sunday. It's probably the same for you! But God does put people in our lives to love.

Who might it be? Maybe a family member. The person one desk or cash register over? That one neighbor you always bump into at the mailbox. The stylist doing your hair or the sandwich artist making your subs. In my previous Life Group, a guy frequently shared about striking up conversations with strangers in the gym, leading to sharing struggles and prayer requests. (Shout out to Ron.) If nobody (or too many people) comes to mind, take a moment to pray and ask God who He's preparing for you.

If you want some help getting started, I really appreciate Lydia Nigh's 6 Ls from her "Bringing God into Everyday Conversations" talk. It's simple but effective. I included it in the notes.

## **7. How does knowing Jesus will return affect our behavior?**

When God made people, He wanted them to relate to Him and each other with love. But we all want to do things our way. That's bad because God says so. And God says it's bad because it's bad for us. Sex outside of marriage, drinking booze to excess, or unnecessary conflict all turn good things bad. Since God is righteous, He has to punish those who break the law and harm others.

So, Jesus came into a dark world where everyone was doing their thing. He lived a perfect life and He loved God and everyone perfectly. If everyone loved as Jesus loved, we would live in a perfect society. There would be no bickering, beef, brawling, battles, betrayal, or bad blood. But people didn't want to love like Jesus, so they killed Him. While on the cross, God poured out all our punishment onto Jesus. But Jesus came back to life, proving everything He said was true.

If we believe Jesus died for us, God forgives everything we've done or will do. Instead of being labeled as criminals, we're adopted as God's beloved sons and daughters. But God doesn't leave us here to live forever in a dark, broken world like some YA dystopia novel series. Jesus promises to come back so we can be together forever (John 14:1-4).

How does this Gospel truth affect how we live? Paul writes that we're ending one era and moving into another. We're living in an age of darkness/night when evil is the norm, but Jesus is coming and it will be daytime, filled with His light. Guys, He's coming back, so let's act like it.

Growing up, the most confusing part of weddings was the bachelor party (AKA stag parties or buck's night). It's changed nowadays, but I remember these in movies involving lots of alcohol, doing crazy stuff, and strippers/prostitutes. I saw parts of the 1984 comedy *Bachelor Party* on TV when I was way too young. I think the rationale was "This is your last night as a single guy, so do all the crazy stuff you won't be able to do!"

In a way, that kinda' mirrors what Paul is saying. Throughout the Bible, the relationship between God and His people is often compared to marriage (for example, check out Hosea). When the Israelites worshipped other gods, they were cheating on God. This illustration continues in the New Testament, where Jesus is the groom and the church is the bride. The apostle John sees a vision when Jesus will return to marry the church (Revelation 19:6-9).

As I mentioned last week, Roman religion wasn't about morality. As long as you did your religious duty, the gods didn't care how you lived. (Check out BAD STUFF IN THIS PASSAGE in the NOTES for more details on what Paul mentions here.) Many Roman Christians kept living however they wanted.

I think bachelor parties are a good metaphor to think about our behavior.

**Is Jesus' return something good?** If getting wasted with the boys and sleeping around is important, why not just stay single? Why pursue marriage if it will simply curb your fun? Yes, marriage involves sacrifice, but those parties look like a last meal before execution. Surely there must be some good to look forward to, instead of just the sadness of leaving the old life behind.

We believe in Jesus because we recognize our behavior is evil and harmful, so we want to stop. What does that say about our view of Jesus if we deliberately do the bad stuff? It sounds like we'd rather enjoy life without Jesus because He will damper our fun.

**Won't the bride be upset?** As Mitzi can attest, I'm terrible at saying romantic lines (at least without sounding incredibly corny). But I'm pretty sure brides-to-be find their grooms sleeping around before the wedding very un-romantic. "But I still love you, babe! Those girls meant nothing to me. You're the only one for me!" Yeah, right.

Jesus loved us so much that He came to die for us. I somehow doubt He'd be happy to know we're happily doing the things He died for. Does doing all the things our loved one hates indicate love?

**Won't the bride know?** When the bride finds out it's usually played out as a comedy. The guy says something like, "It's not what it looks like!" In reality, he was hoping she would never find out. Shenanigans happen and they still get married. In reality, those actions are ample grounds to call the wedding off.

We know that God sees everything we do and nothing is hidden, so why act like we can hide from God? Putting your head under a napkin can't hide your sin (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/ortolans-birds-enjoyed-french-delicacy-are-being-eaten-extinction-180972272/>). Paul tells us to remember to live in the daytime, knowing God sees what's going on. Live like how we will live when Jesus returns.

## 8. What sins do we need to cast off? What can we do to put on Jesus instead?

Paul uses the metaphor of changing clothes.

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. 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**. Let us walk properly as in the **daytime**, not in **orgies** and **drunkenness**, not in **sexual immorality** and **sensuality**, not in **quarreling** and **jealousy**. But **put on the Lord Jesus Christ**, and **make no provision for the flesh**, to gratify its desires.

Take off the bad stuff, like satisfying our urges without healthy boundaries or causing strife for selfish purposes. Those are usually things Christians acknowledge are bad on Sunday morning, even though some of us do it during the week.

On the flipside, Paul tells us to replace the bad with good. If we only get rid of the bad, we leave a vacuum that's easily filled. Not eating junk food is good, but if you don't replace it with something healthy, you'll still be hungry and likely to go back to eating junk. Likewise, when we stop sins, we should fill our lives with something good to fill that gap or scratch that itch.

Here are some suggestions. My current Bible reading is going through Psalms, so I felt it appropriate to integrate what I'm reading here.

<b>Work of Darkness to Cast Off</b>	<b>Possible Itch Needing Scratched</b>	<b>Ways to Put on Jesus Christ</b>
Complaining about our job/spouse/church/politician. It may feel good for a moment, but never solves anything. It often makes things worse.	Frustration or desperation that needs to be released.	Go to Jesus in prayer. The Psalms are brutally honest. What's important is that they're going to God because only He can help.  Recognize and thank God for the good things He's given you.
Mindlessly being on social media or YouTube/TikTok for way too long. How many of us remember 10% of what we read or watch after hours on our phones? At best it's a waste of time. At worst, it fills our minds with the wrong things.	Stimulation. Our brains are overstimulated and need to cool off, but we keep it going. Or we're bored and need healthy stimulation.	Savor God's creation. Natural beauty points to God (e.g., Psalm 104). Take a walk outside (the weather is great!). Ponder how powerful/creative God is to make all you see.  Read the Bible or a Christian book. Let it point you to something worthwhile.
Being jealous and quarreling over unimportant things. We want to feel heard or seen. If things don't go our way, we feel bad.	Feeling inadequate or insecure. Dissatisfaction.	Remind yourself that Jesus loves you so much He died for you and He will never leave you. God loves you whether or not you have that job, physique, or recognition from others.  Find out how other Christians deal with discontentment or not getting their way.

# NOTES

## 6 Ls from Bringing God into Everyday Conversations

I heard Lydia share this a few years ago and loved it. Here's a condensed outline of part of her talk.

1. **LORD** - Pray and ask God to work through you. Ultimately, it's about God, not you.
2. **LOOK** - Look for something that may lead to a conversation, like something you have in common or something that makes you curious.
3. **LOVE** – Find something about them to love. Ask God to show you what that person means to Him.
4. **LISTEN** – Ask God to help you listen to them effectively and encouragingly.
5. **LEARN** – Be genuinely open and humble to receive, reflecting back what you're learning.
6. **LEAVE** – Offer them something to leave with, like a contact card, encouragement, or prayer. Leave with a final question, such as “What’s really on your heart today that I can pray for you right now?”.

## BAD STUFF IN THIS PASSAGE

I can only give you a brief glimpse to help you see the context of the church in Rome, so here are two areas Paul mentions

**Sex.** God created sex to be enjoyed within the context of marriage. In ancient Rome, prostitutes were everywhere, including major public areas and events (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/prostitutes-and-matrons-in-the-roman-world/prostitutes-and-matrons-in-the-urban-landscape/A32FD428A0367AD136F99B6119769929>). In a quote too graphic for me to quote here, Cato the Younger calls men virtuous for satisfying their urges with prostitutes rather than other men's wives. Virtuous seems a stretch.

Sex included the same gender. Paul writes, “For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men” (Romans 1:26-27).

Nowadays, our society associates same-sex relationships with romance or love. In Roman society, it was about power. It was good to be the “active” partner, but looked down on for being “receiving”. We see this distinction in 1 Corinthians 6:9. The ESV compresses two Greek terms, μαλακός (malakos) and ἀρσενοκοίτης (arsenokoytace). μαλακός means “to being passive in a same-sex relationship, effeminate esp. ... men and boys who are sodomized by other males in such a relationship”. ἀρσενοκοίτης refers to “a male who engages in sexual activity w. a person of his own sex ... of one who assumes the dominant role in same-sex activity” (BDAG). It's good to be penetrating, shameful/demeaning to be receiving.

We see a huge difference with Christianity. For one thing, same-sex relationships are not what God intended, so it doesn't matter which role someone takes. Secondly, since men and women are both equally image-bearers of God, there shouldn't be a power dynamic within sex. Paul writes “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” (1 Corinthians 7:3–4). There is mutual dignity, worth, and care.

**Drunkness.** Pliny the Elder lived during Paul's time and wrote a whole chapter decrying drunkenness. It's a fascinating read and so much of it's still relevant for today. Here are some snippets.

The Natural History 14.28 – If any one will take the trouble duly to consider the matter, he will find that upon no one subject is the industry of man kept more constantly on the alert than upon the making of

wine; as if Nature had not given us water as a beverage, the one, in fact, of which all other animals make use. We, on the other hand, even go so far as to make our very beasts of burden drink wine: so vast are our efforts, so vast our labours, and so boundless the cost which we thus lavish upon a liquid which deprives man of his reason and drives him to frenzy and to the commission of a thousand crimes! So great, however, are its attractions, that a great part of mankind are of opinion that there is nothing else in life worth living for.

Pliny notes how obsessed with making wine people are, even though they have water. They even give it to their animals! All this effort for a drink that leads people to commit tons of crime.

And then, too, what vessels are employed for holding wine! carved all over with the representations of adulterous intrigues, as if, in fact, drunkenness itself was not sufficiently capable of teaching us lessons of lustfulness. ... We find one person induced to drink upon the condition that he shall have as much to eat as he has previously drunk, while another has to quaff as many cups as he has thrown points on the dice. Then it is that the roving, insatiate eyes are setting a price upon the matron's chastity; and yet, heavy as they are with wine, they do not fail to betray their designs to her husband. Then it is that all the secrets of the mind are revealed; one man is heard to disclose the provisions of his will, another lets fall some expression of fatal import, and so fails to keep to himself words which will be sure to come home to him with a cut throat. And how many a man has met his death in this fashion! Indeed, it has become quite a common proverb, that "in wine there is truth."

Should he, however, fortunately escape all these dangers, the drunkard never beholds the rising sun, by which his life of drinking is made all the shorter. From wine, too, comes that pallid hue, those drooping eyelids, those sore eyes, those tremulous hands, unable to hold with steadiness the overflowing vessel, condign punishment in the shape of sleep agitated by Furies during the restless night, and, the supreme reward of inebriety, those dreams of monstrous lustfulness and of forbidden delights. Then on the next day there is the breath reeking of the wine-cask, and a nearly total obliviousness of everything, from the annihilation of the powers of the memory. And this, too, is what they call "seizing the moments of life! whereas, in reality, while other men lose the day that has gone before, the drinker has already lost the one that is to come.

It's an unpleasant scene! People are playing drinking games. A guy's getting ideas of what he wants to do to a girl and accidentally tells her husband. People are telling secrets that get them killed. The next day they're super hungover and the next day is already over.

Not much has changed in 2,000 years, has it?