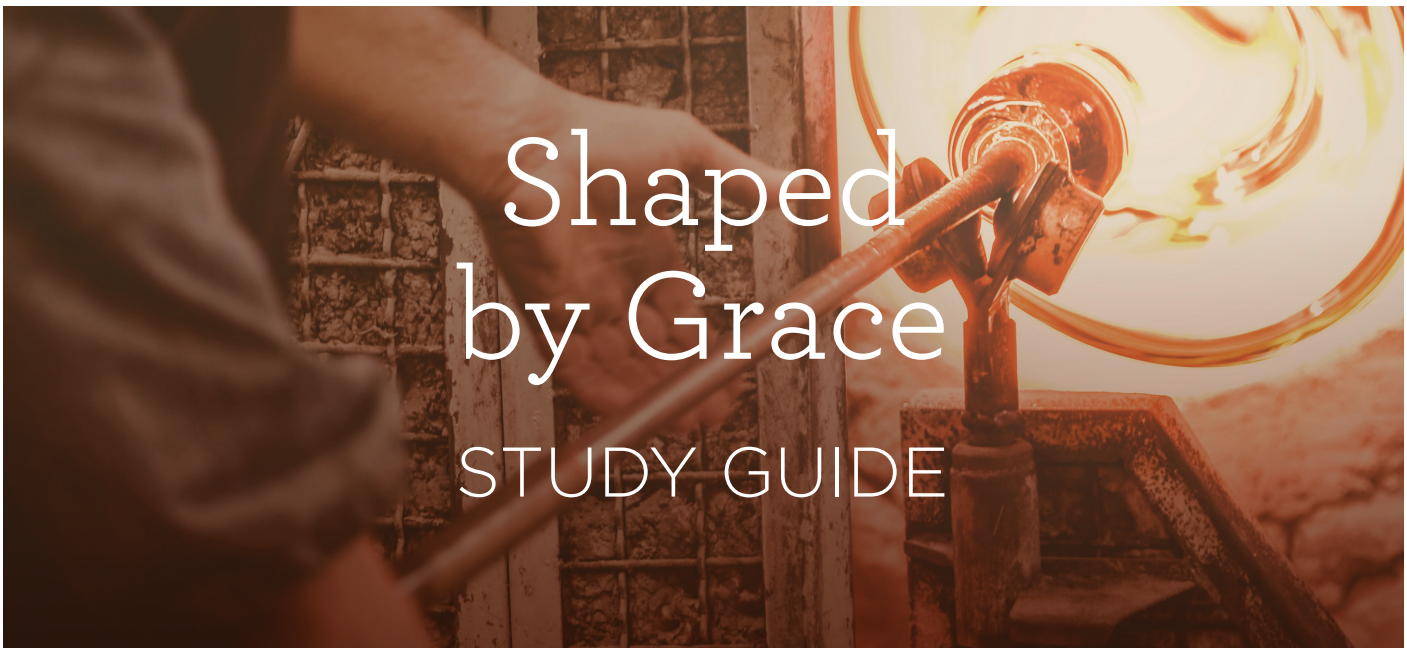

Shaped by Grace

STUDY GUIDE

TRUTH FOR LIFE

THIS STUDY GUIDE

contains fourteen sessions that will help you explore the apostle Paul's spiritual, moral, and ethical exhortations found in Romans 12. The content for each session focuses on a corresponding message from the series *Shaped by Grace*, which you can watch, read, or listen to for free. While the first eleven chapters of the letter explain a variety of theological concepts related to salvation, chapter 12 begins a major transition in the letter, as Paul shifts his attention to the "What now?" question—from the conceptual to the practical.

FIND ALL 14 MESSAGES AT
TFL.ORG/SHAPEDBYGRACE

Shaped by Grace: Study Guide
Copyright © 2023 by Truth For Life
PO Box 398000 Cleveland, Ohio 44139

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of Truth For Life.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

When the Gospel takes hold of us, our hearts and minds can't help but be transformed. Whether in the mundane or profound aspects of life, our new identity in Christ should cause us to be different from the world around us. But what does this look like practically? How do these distinctions show themselves each day in our families, work, and local churches?

In this series from Romans 12, Alistair Begg introduces us to the revolutionary impact God's grace has in the lives of believers. As he points out, it is impossible to live in light of the Gospel without changing not only our actions but also our motives and inner desires. The Gospel calls us to live in harmony with one another and challenges us to forgive and seek blessing for those who wish to harm us. If we allow the grace of God to first shape our hearts, our lives will surely follow.

Each session includes four parts:

1) Getting Started: a brief summary statement or commentary on the sermon, followed by an introductory question

2) Key Scriptures: important Bible verses that were referenced in the sermon and are flagged for further meditation and memorization

3) Going Deeper: questions to help you process the main ideas of the sermon

4) Praise and Prayer: either a poem or hymn that can be committed to memory, incorporated in worship, and used as the basis for prayer about what you have learned and considered or a prayer prompt taken from Alistair's own prayer at the conclusion of the corresponding message

SESSION ONE

"A Call to Commitment" | Romans 12:1–2

Getting Started

William Booth was a nineteenth-century minister best known as the founder and first General of the Salvation Army. When he was asked to explain how his life had become so impactful, he replied simply, "Jesus Christ has all of me." These words resonate with what Paul says in Romans 12:1: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." As Alistair explains, Paul calls us to give all of ourselves to God—but he does not make this call apart from the context of God's grace. When we rest completely upon the Gospel, we can give ourselves fully to God.

William Booth came from insubstantial means but was used by God in a remarkable way. His ministry continues today even though he died in 1912. In what ways are you allowing your circumstances to limit the impact your life might have for God's kingdom? How would embracing Paul's words transform the way you think about your circumstances, and how God might use them for your good and His glory?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

Romans 12:1

"But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."

Titus 3:4–5

Going Deeper

1. Alistair says that Romans 12 is based on the "theological underpinnings" of what Paul described in Romans 1—11. How would you summarize these "theological underpinnings"? Be sure to identify specific verses and/or passages from Romans.

2. Why is understanding our need for God's mercy foundational for understanding the Gospel? How would Christianity be different if we did not need God's mercy?

3. Alistair is careful to define *total depravity* as referring to the extent of our depravity instead of the degree of our depravity. Why is this an important distinction? Why is it important to know that the effects of sin have reached every part of who we are?

4. Alistair says that those who are set free by grace are able to become all that God intends for them to be. How does God's grace free us to be transformed in a way that would be impossible to achieve on our own merits?

5. Alistair says that seeking to become a living sacrifice apart from trusting in Christ will either lead you to despair or turn you into a legalist. Why is Christ the key for growing in godliness and serving God? How does removing Christ inevitably distort what it looks like to follow God?

There's only one life,
'Twill soon be past;
Only what's done
For Christ will last.

"ONLY ONE LIFE"
BY C. T. STUDD

SESSION TWO

"A Transformed Mind" | Romans 12:1–2

Getting Started

Paul calls us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices—to give everything we are to Christ. How do we do so? By becoming transformed by the renewing of our minds! Alistair compares the mind to the control tower at a major airport: in these relatively small rooms, decisions are made and instructions are given that ensure the safe arrival of passengers and the protection of assets within the airport property. Chaos in the control tower will lead to chaos all around. Similarly, our minds must be renewed by the Gospel. Only then will we be entirely committed to Christ.

In what ways have you seen others, or perhaps yourself, attempting to divide mind and body? How would you describe someone who says one thing but does another?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Romans 12:2

"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."

Colossians 3:1

"Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct."

1 Peter 1:13–15

Going Deeper

1. Alistair describes the renewal of our minds as "the Word of God, by the Spirit of God, in the child of God, conforming us to the image of the Son of God." Briefly explain the importance of each element in this description.

2. Romans 12:2 commands us not to be conformed to this age ("to this world" in some translations). What characterizes the age in which we live? How can you avoid the ungodly influences of this age while you live in it?

3. Based on 1 Corinthians 1:20—25, how might unbelievers react when they encounter you as you're being transformed by the renewal of your mind? How should you then respond?

4. In describing how our minds can be renewed, Alistair links the work of the Holy Spirit with the Word of God. Why is it important for the work of the Holy Spirit to be linked to God's Word?

5. Alistair argues that discerning "the will of God" in Romans 12:2 means learning that "God's way is the best way." How is this phrase typically explained? How can believing that "God's way is the best way" lead to greater pleasure, pleasantness, and peace?

For me to live is Christ, to die is gain,
To hold His hand and walk His narrow way.
There is no peace, no joy, no thrill
Like walking in His will;
For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.

"FOR ME, TO LIVE IS CHRIST"
BY KEITH WHITE

SESSION THREE

"We Belong Together – Part One"

Romans 12:3–8

Getting Started

Paul calls the Romans to offer themselves as living sacrifices and to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. So what keeps us from following these commands as we ought? In Romans 12:3, Paul identifies pride as the main reason so many of us fail to see Romans 12:1–2 become a reality. We put ourselves at the center of the universe and fail to recognize how dependent we are upon God. Paul points the Romans toward humility as the key needed to set these things in motion.

How have you seen pride hinder your spiritual growth? Pray that this lesson will help you recognize the destructive power of pride in your life and convince you to pursue humility.

KEY SCRIPTURES

"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."

Romans 12:3

"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Going Deeper

1. Alistair summarizes Romans 12:3–8 as Paul's exhortation for his readers to think properly about who and what they are and where and how they fit in the family of God. Why is the family of God crucial for obedience to Romans 12:1–2?

2. Alistair says, "When we take what is a gift and we attribute it to ourselves as if we earned it, or as if it is a credit to us, or as if somehow or another it is inherently ours, then we are in extreme danger of doing what [Paul] says not to do: cherishing exaggerated ideas of our own importance." What does it look like for you to abuse a gift or a talent for your own gain?

3. Paul says God gave him a "thorn in the flesh" to keep him from becoming conceited (2 Cor. 12:7). Think of an inadequacy or inconvenience in your life. How might its presence be a demonstration of the mercy of God? What can you learn from Paul about dealing with such "thorns"?

4. Alistair warns us against evaluating our faithfulness by what others think. How and when can the praise and admiration of others lead us astray?

5. Alistair says that the answer to self-aggrandizement is not self-denigration but sober judgement. How is self-denigration a counterproductive response to self-aggrandizement?

6. Alistair argues that humility will not discard our giftedness but enable our giftedness to be used for God's glory. How have you seen giftedness wrongly discarded to avoid self-aggrandizement?

O Lord God, we want to be a people marked by the selflessness of Christ. So we embrace all of our distinctives. We recognize that we are on a variety of scales (intellectual, social, physical) and that we're better together than any one of us is on our own. And as we try to think these things out, we pray that the mind of Christ might increasingly be ours, so that we might live in harmony and usefulness. For we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.

SESSION FOUR

"We Belong Together – Part Two"

Romans 12:3–8

Getting Started

After warning his audience against holding exaggerated ideas of their own importance (Rom. 12:3), Paul encourages them to understand themselves as members of one body, each fulfilling his or her designated role for one another's mutual benefit. The roles that various members of the body fill involve the use of what are frequently referred to as "spiritual gifts." These are gifts God has given the followers of Christ to help others mature in their faith. Here, Paul lists seven gifts: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and doing acts of mercy.

Paul discusses spiritual gifts and roles in other letters as well, but the gifts he describes differ slightly in each letter. Compare this passage with 1 Corinthians 12:4–11 and Ephesians 4:11. How are these lists of spiritual gifts similar to each other? How do they differ?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."

Romans 12:6–8

"Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God."

Colossians 2:18–19

Going Deeper

1. Alistair summarizes Romans 12:3–8 with five words: *unity*, *plurality*, *diversity*, *harmony*, and *identity*. Why is it difficult to achieve all five of these realities? Why is doing so crucial for the church?

2. Why is commitment to a local church necessary to adequately obey Romans 12:3–8?

3. How does Paul's use of the body to illustrate the nature of the church correct the mistaken tendency to associate the church with a building?

4. Translations differ over whether the conclusion of verse 6 should read "in proportion to his faith" or "in proportion to the faith." Alistair argues for the latter and emphasizes the importance of agreement with Christian doctrine. How does this interpretation limit how those who prophesy use their gift?

5. Paul says that those who show mercy should do so cheerfully. Why is the attitude in which we exercise our gifts as important as the gift itself?

6. Alistair says that spiritual gifts are to be exercised to benefit the body of Christ, not our own selfish agendas. How can you tell the difference?

My tongue repeats her vows,
"Peace to this sacred house!"
For here my friends and kindred dwell;
And since my glorious God
Makes thee His blest abode,
My soul shall ever love thee well.

"HOW PLEASED AND BLEST WAS I"
BY ISAAC WATTS

SESSION FIVE

"Genuine Christian Love — Part One"

Romans 12:9–10

Getting Started

In Romans 12:9, Paul writes, "Let love be genuine." If ever there was a statement in the Bible that needed little explanation, this would seem to be it. If, however, we make the mistake of understanding "love" as it is commonly understood in our culture, we risk missing Paul's point completely. Instead of taking our cues from how our society understands love, Alistair teaches, we must begin by reflecting upon God's love for us as revealed in Scripture. When we begin with God's love for us, we will discover an unnatural love that is vaguely familiar but uncannily attractive to an onlooking world.

Alistair teaches that the love described here is not emotionalism or sentimentalism. Do you think these words describe how most people understand love? What role should emotions and sentiment have in love? How can authentic love limit the influence of emotion and sentimentality?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil;
hold fast to what is good."

Romans 12:9

"God shows his love for us in that while we
were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Romans 5:8

Going Deeper

1. Alistair is concerned that Romans 12:9–10 be read in light of the preceding chapters. How could popular notions about love distort Paul's meaning in these verses if we fail to adequately pay attention to context?

2. People often want to avoid bad news. But why is it that receiving bad news is crucial for understanding and believing the Gospel?

3. Why is simply knowing the facts about the Gospel not enough for salvation? What else is needed?

4. Why would someone who receives the Gospel be tempted to think he or she would avoid hardships and suffering? How does Paul correct this faulty idea elsewhere (e.g., Rom. 8:18)?

5. Paul argues that God did not love us because of our attractiveness; instead, He loved us in spite of the unattractiveness of our sin. How does this challenge our outlook toward others—especially other believers in Christ?

6. Alistair argues that unbelievers will notice something different in the way Christians relate to one another that is absent from the rest of society. What are some examples of this in your own life and spheres of influence?

O the love that drew salvation's plan!
O the grace that brought it down to man!
O the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary.
Mercy there was great, and grace was free;
Pardon there was multiplied to me.
There my burdened soul found liberty—at Calvary.

"AT CALVARY"
BY WILLIAM REED NEWELL

SESSION SIX

"Genuine Christian Love — Part Two"

Romans 12:9–10

Getting Started

In Romans 12:9–10, Paul calls the Romans to show sincere or genuine Christian love. Alistair further elaborates on Christian love by saying that it is the love that enables us to serve one another without any kind of hidden agenda. Central to Alistair's explanation of Christian love is the phrase "slaves of righteousness" (Rom. 6:18). Only by becoming slaves of righteousness can we love others genuinely, without any kind of hidden agenda, because we will be concerned not for ourselves but for righteousness.

Alistair teaches that all of Romans 12–16 can be helpfully summarized as Paul's explanation of what it looks like to be a slave of righteousness. How is this concept apparent in Romans 12:9–10?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Love one another with brotherly affection.
Outdo one another in showing honor."

Romans 12:10

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 2:3–5

Going Deeper

1. Some people, if they're honest, want to know how far they can pursue sin without becoming enslaved by it. Why does this mindset fall far short of genuine love for God?

2. Sometimes we forget that Paul's letters were written to a historical audience. Romans was written to believers who lived in the capital city of the Roman Empire—and what we know of Rome shows that it was a place of moral perversity. How would this culture have worked against Paul's command to pursue genuine love? How does our culture work against pursuing genuine love?

3. Alistair says, "One of the marks of a culture that has turned its back on God is not simply that it is *confused* about what God has said, but it is *opposed* to what God has said." What's are some examples of confusion about God that you see in your context? What about opposition?

4. The words various translations use to describe love in Romans 12:10 (e.g., “devoted” in the NIV and “brotherly” in the ESV) are familial words. How can you cultivate such love among the members of your church?

5. Alistair says that our fellowship with other believers should be characterized by the overflowing righteousness of Christ, not by doing our best to conform to a series of rules and regulations. Why should grace come before rules and regulations when we engage with other believers?

O Thou who art the only origin of all that is good and fair and true, unto Thee I lift up my soul.

O God, let Thy Spirit now enter my heart.

Now as I pray this prayer, let not any room within me be furtively closed to keep Thee out.

O God, give me power to follow after that which is good.

Now as I pray this prayer, let there be no secret purpose of evil formed in my mind, that waits for an opportunity of fulfillment.

O God, bless all my undertakings and cause them to prosper.

Now as I pray this prayer, let me not be still holding to some undertaking on which I dare not ask Thy blessing.

O God, give me chastity.

Now as I pray this prayer, let me not say to myself secretly,
But not yet, or, *But not overmuch.*

O God, bless every member of this household.

Now as I pray this prayer, let me not still harbour in my heart a wrongful feeling of jealousy or bitterness or anger towards any of them.

O God, bless my enemies and those who have done me wrong.

Now as I pray this prayer, let me not still cherish in my heart the resolve to requite them when occasion offers.

O God, let Thy Kingdom come on earth.

Now as I pray this prayer, let me not still be intending to devote my own best hours and years to the service of lesser ends.

O Holy Spirit of God, as I rise from these acts of devotion, let me not return to evil thoughts and worldly ways, but let that mind be in me which was also in Christ Jesus. Amen.[1]

"SIXTH DAY, EVENING"

JOHN BAILLIE, *A DIARY OF PRIVATE PRAYER*

[1] John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 31.

SESSION SEVEN

"Divine Righteousness Applied" | Romans 12:11

Getting Started

After the reader has waded through eleven chapters of theology, the indicatives of Romans 12 may be a relief for believers eager to put the Bible into action: "Finally, something I can *do*!" But those of us who are eager to put faith into practice should pause to consider the warning Alistair gives. There is an inherent danger in responding to the exhortations in Romans 12 without recognizing the framework in which Paul gives these exhortations: the transforming power of the Gospel.

Alistair says that if we do not follow the imperatives in Romans 12 for the right reasons, we'll end up with some serious theological confusion. Why do the reasons for following God's commands matter?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord."

Romans 12:11

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit."

1 Peter 3:18

Going Deeper

1. Alistair cautions his listeners against thinking of spirituality as being focused upon some hidden dimension of life. Instead, he points to John Murray, who says that spirituality is "conscious, intelligent, consecrated devotion to the service of God."[2] What's the danger in having no interest in what Murray describes but still being interested in spirituality?

2. Alistair stresses the importance of recognizing that moral imperatives (i.e., biblical commands) are built upon doctrinal indicatives (i.e., biblical truths). What is it called when doctrinal indicatives are built upon moral imperatives? Why is this so damaging for the church?

3. Many people believe that salvation is something that happens only at the beginning of the Christian life. Alistair argues that salvation encompasses the entirety of Christian experience. How does keeping salvation central day in and day out help us grow in faith?

4. Why is our natural reflex to want at least a partial role in our justification? Why is this impossible?

[2] John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2022), 436.

5. How would you respond to someone who says that all we can do for salvation is try our best and hope that it is enough?

6. Alistair quotes pastor and theologian Tim Keller, who writes, "Religion operates on the principle of 'I obey—therefore I am accepted.' The basic operating principle of the gospel is 'I am accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ—therefore I obey.'"[3] How does this difference reveal the freedom we have in the Gospel?

Alas! and did my Savior bleed,
And did my Sovereign die!
Would He devote that sacred head
For sinners such as I? ...

Drops of tears can ne'er repay
The debt of love I owe.
Here, Lord, I give myself away;
'Tis all that I can do.

"ALAS, AND DID MY SAVIOR BLEED"
BY ISAAC WATTS

[3] Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 114.

SESSION EIGHT

"Love in Action" | Romans 12:11–13

Getting Started

Throughout this study, Alistair has emphasized the necessity of understanding Romans 12 within its context. If we fail to do so, the moral imperatives will distort our understanding of the Gospel's true nature.

Alistair says that theological concepts such as righteousness must be worked out in the everyday events of our Christian lives. Are you more likely to find yourself focusing on theology at the expense of application or vice versa? What steps can you take to ensure a more balanced approach?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.
Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality."

Romans 12:12–13

"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men."

Colossians 3:23

Going Deeper

1. Alistair says that Romans 12:11 is a warning not to allow laziness or lethargy to take over our lives. Why would Paul be concerned about laziness in the Christian life?

2. Romans 12:11 demands consistent zeal in the Christian life. Does this describe your life? How can we guard and foster our zeal?

3. Paul specifies that Christians should share with God's people who are in need. Why do you think he does this? Why did he not simply say, "Share with all people in need," instead?

4. Alistair says, "I've discovered in my own life that when I allow myself to be overcome by discouragement, when my spirit begins to faint, it is almost inevitably because the claims of the Lord's service are not uppermost in my thoughts." Do you find this to be true for you too? How does serving God help us when we face discouragement?

5. Alistair says, "We are not energized by a consideration of what we are doing for God, but we are actually energized when we think about what God has done for us." How does this reflect the main message of this series?

6. Alistair clarifies that "hope" in Romans 12:12 is not wishful thinking that something will or will not occur but absolute certainty about what God has promised, even though we have yet to experience it. Why is this distinction important?

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!

"WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS"
BY JOSEPH MENDLICOTT SCRIVEN

SESSION NINE

"Responding to Persecution — Part One"

Romans 12:14

Getting Started

The imperatives encountered so far in this study neatly align with how most Christians in the West understand their faith. That changes as we arrive at verse 14, where Paul introduces the issue of persecution. Many Christians—especially in the West—do not have a category within their faith for genuine persecution. It's an unpleasant subject that most would hope to avoid—but the Bible teaches that Christians should expect to face persecution in a world hostile towards the Gospel.

Persecution is a difficult topic to discuss. Most would prefer to avoid discussing it entirely. Why, though, is it both helpful and necessary to properly understand how it relates to the Christian?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Bless those who persecute you; bless
and do not curse them."

Romans 12:14

"I have said these things to you, that in me you may
have peace. In the world you will have tribulation.
But take heart; I have overcome the world."

John 16:33

Going Deeper

1. Alistair suggests that many people envision a form of Christianity in which the idea of persecution is absolutely alien. Is this true Christianity?

2. The Bible teaches that Christians will face persecution. How can we be honest about this reality when sharing our faith with others?

3. Jesus says that He has overcome the world (John 16:33). So why do His followers still face tribulation?

4. Paul says, "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). Why does godliness make one a target for persecution in a way nominal belief does not?

5. While most of us do not face physical persecution, we may face persecution that is subtle, intellectual, and emotional. How can you prepare yourself to face this kind of persecution?

6. Alistair notes that for Christians in many places today, persecution is both a daily threat and a seemingly insurmountable challenge. How can you support these fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?

Am I a soldier of the cross,
A follow'r of the Lamb?
And shall I fear to own His cause
Or blush to speak His name?

Must I be carried to the skies
On flow'ry beds of ease
While others fought to win the prize
And sailed through bloody seas?

"AM I A SOLDIER OF THE CROSS?"
BY ISAAC WATTS

SESSION TEN

"Responding to Persecution — Part Two"

Romans 12:14

Getting Started

No one appreciates persecution, regardless of whether it is physical and life-threatening or otherwise. But as with all aspects of life, the way we respond to persecution reveals a lot about how we understand God, His sovereignty, the Gospel, and our faith. Romans 12:14 reminds us that persecution creates an opportunity to show the Gospel to those who need it. The question is whether we will seize the opportunity persecution provides us.

Alistair says, "Christian discipleship brings us into the realm of persecution." Why is dealing with persecution an inevitable part of following Jesus?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life
in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

2 Timothy 3:12

"As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus,
receive my spirit.' And falling to his knees he cried out
with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against
them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

Acts 7:59–60

Going Deeper

1. Alistair reminds us that Christianity's persecutors are blind to the glory of the Gospel. How does this help us come to terms with what they do?

2. How might retaliating against persecution keep the persecutor from witnessing God's grace and mercy?

3. Alistair says that our goal in blessing those who persecute us is for God to save them. How does this make Paul's command even more challenging?

4. How is Romans 12:14 consistent with what you learned from verse 2?

5. The first part of the process of blessing those who persecute us is reminding ourselves of God's reaction to us. How is this step similar to the lesson of Jesus' parable in Matthew 18:21—35?

Father, we thank you for the clarity of Your Word,

the peculiar challenge of this verse,

the impossibility of it apart from Your grace,

and the wonder of it when we see its evidence in the lives of others.

Make us more like Christ, we pray.

Help us to think biblically and to live properly

so that we might have the joy, in daunting circumstances,

to see unbelieving people coming to follow Jesus Christ—

not because we meted out the justice they deserve

but because we were able to tell them about

and to show them a mercy that none of us deserve;

because we were able to tell them about a Jesus who said,

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden,

and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

SESSION ELEVEN

"Truth for Life" | Romans 12:15–16

Getting Started

We cannot divide the commands of Romans 12 from the Gospel without falling into a legalism that distorts God's truth and makes the commands impossible to follow anyway. With this sermon, Alistair points out that the opposite truth is also at work: we cannot be content with simply *knowing about* the truth of the Gospel; it demands to be lived! That is why the Gospel is truth for life.

Alistair says, "There is a direct correlation between obedience, submission to the lordship of Jesus, and the enjoyment that comes from living in light of the truth." How does living according to truth lead to our experience of joy?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight."

Romans 12:15–16

"If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

John 13:17

Going Deeper

1. Alistair describes the context to which Paul wrote in Romans as multiethnic. Why is this important to understand when reading Romans 12:15–16?

2. Sympathy should be easily expressed among Christians, because there is an organic and intrinsic unity between us. What might the inability to sympathize with another believer indicate about us?

3. Alistair argues that unbelievers will first notice how the Gospel has changed our *behavior* rather than our *beliefs*. What implications does this have for evangelism?

4. Alistair remarks that sympathy can be expressed toward both encouragement and disappointment. Do you find it difficult to rejoice with others who are rejoicing? What about weeping with others who weep? Why?

5. Why is harmony regarding Gospel matters essential for the church? How does it help the church to preserve truth and persevere when different opinions about other matters emerge?

You are writing a gospel,
A chapter each day,
By deeds that you do,
By words that you say.
Men read what you write,
Whether faithless or true,
Say! What is the Gospel
According to you?

COMMONLY ATTRIBUTED TO PAUL GILBERT

SESSION TWELVE

"No Retaliation!" | Romans 12:17–18

Getting Started

Isaac Newton's third law of motion states that for every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction. While Newton was not thinking about interactions between human beings, his insight still seems applicable, especially when the initial action is hurtful or ill-minded. People are naturally inclined toward retaliation. Many live as if harm must be repaid with harm, evil for evil, insult for insult, rudeness for rudeness. Paul recognized the same retributive tendency in his own day. He also recognized how contrary this tendency is in the lives of those who believe the Gospel. That is why he calls for the Romans—and all believers—to have a supernatural response to evil done against them.

Alistair again notes that these verses are written not to unbelievers but to believers. Why does Christ make all the difference in our ability to follow them?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

Romans 12:17–18

"Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

Hebrews 12:14

Going Deeper

1. Paul's command to live in peace with everyone (Rom. 12:18) is universal in scope. In what ways might we attempt to limit the implications of this verse to pertain only to those with whom we get along well already?

2. How are Romans 12:18 and Matthew 5:46 ("If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?") similar? How do they differ?

3. In what ways do you see a tendency toward retribution in your behavior and outlook? How does this outlook keep you from obeying Romans 12:17–18?

4. During the first few centuries of Christianity, believers often faced tremendous persecution. How is the threat of persecution relevant to Romans 12:17? What implications can you draw from this for your own obedience to this verse?

5. Paul qualifies the command to live at peace with everyone with the words "if it is possible." Why might Paul have done so? When would it be impossible for you to live at peace with someone?

6. Living at peace with everyone cannot be done at the sacrifice of truth. How would sacrificing truth distort what Paul commands?

Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days;
Let them flow in endless praise,
Let them flow in endless praise.

Take my hands and let them move
At the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet and let them be
Swift and beautiful for Thee,
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

FRANCES RIDLEY HAVERGAL
"TAKE MY LIFE, AND LET IT BE"

SESSION THIRTEEN

"Essential Christianity — Part One"

Romans 12:19–21

Getting Started

As we approach the chapter's end, the challenges in Romans 12 continue to multiply. These challenges, however, are not exegetical or theological in nature. These are some of the simplest verses in Romans—yet they concern our obedience. Paul draws practical applications from the Gospel that reveal how radically different the life of faith in Christ is from the conventions and behaviors of the world. The question Paul poses to the Romans, and to us, is this: Will we allow the Gospel to transform our lives completely, or will we hold on to patterns of unbelief?

What current situation in your life is Romans 12:19–21 speaking to most urgently?

KEY SCRIPTURES

"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.' 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.'"

Romans 12:19–20

"You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you."

Romans 8:9

Going Deeper

1. It is important not to forget where this series started. Paul began Romans 12 with an appeal to God's mercy. How does God's mercy frame the appeals given in Romans 12:19–21?

2. Why is it so hard to leave it to God to settle the wrongs done against us? What does a heart inclined toward revenge reveal about our understanding of God's power?

3. How can persecution come from within the body of Christ? How have you been guilty of persecuting others within the church?

4. Paul's prohibition against revenge frees us to pray for the salvation of our enemies. Why is their salvation a better outcome than their judgment? What keeps us from seeking their salvation over their condemnation?

5. How did Christ model Romans 12:19–21 for us?

A debtor to mercy alone,
Of covenant mercy I sing;
Nor fear, with Your righteousness on,
My person and off'ring to bring.
The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do;
My Savior's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view.

"A DEBTOR TO MERCY ALONE"
AUGUSTUS TOPLADY

SESSION FOURTEEN

"Essential Christianity — Part Two"

Romans 12:20–21

Getting Started

If we respond to evil committed against us with more evil, we are denying the Gospel, because we are trying to overcome sin in our own strength. Paul demands a radically different and Gospel-centered response: instead of taking matters into our own hands, we should overcome evil by responding with good. This is what God has done for us in Christ.

What would it look like for you to overcome evil done against you with good? Use a specific example from your life.

KEY SCRIPTURES

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Romans 12:21

"Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"

Romans 2:3–4

Going Deeper

1. Alistair warns against robbing a text of its impact by qualifying it too much. What steps can you take to accurately apply a biblical text while avoiding any attempt to wiggle free from its demands?

2. The imprecatory Psalms, in which the speaker curses his enemies, seem to be at odds with Paul's direction against vengeance. Alistair argues that the imprecatory Psalms are not prayers for personal vengeance but appeals to God that He would protect His own glory. Why is this distinction important?

3. Paul's statement regarding burning coals is not an incentive to bring harm on those who are mistreating you; it is a reminder to point them toward reconciliation with God. How might responding to evil with good open doors for evangelism?

4. Are you surprised by Paul's statement regarding burning coals? How is this metaphor consistent with Paul's emphasis in Romans 12:17–21?

5. When we respond to evil done against us with evil in return, we are trying to overcome evil on our own terms. Why will this ultimately never work?

We are but little children weak,
Nor born in any high estate;
What can we do for Jesus' sake,
Who is so high and good and great? ...

O day by day each Christian child
Has much to do, without, within;
A death to die for Jesus' sake,
A weary war to wage with sin.

When deep within our swelling hearts
The thoughts of pride and anger rise,
When bitter words are on our tongues,
And tears of passion in our eyes;

Then we may stay the angry blow,
Then we may check the hasty word,
Give gentle answers back again,
And fight a battle for our Lord.

"WE ARE BUT LITTLE CHILDREN WEAK"
CECIL FRANCES ALEXANDER

ALISTAIR BEGG is the Bible teacher on *Truth For Life*, a daily and weekend program that brings the exposition of Scripture to a global audience through radio, podcast, and a wide range of digital and streaming platforms.

Since its launch in 1995, *Truth For Life* has featured teaching drawn from Alistair's decades of faithful preaching at Parkside Church, where he served as senior pastor from 1983 until 2025.

Alistair and his wife, Susan, have been married since 1975. They have three grown children and nine grandchildren.

To see more studies from Truth For Life and Alistair Begg, visit **truthforlife.org/studyguides**.

Provide your feedback about this study at **letters@truthforlife.org**.

THIS STUDY GUIDE PROVIDED BY

TRUTHFORLIFE®

THE BIBLE-TEACHING MINISTRY OF **ALISTAIR BEGG**

truthforlife.org