Dare to Be Real

A Journey Through Romans 12

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Adapted from the Dare to Be Real sermon series

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A Note to the Reader

Romans 12 describes what a life shaped by the mercy of God looks like. Paul does not begin with a list of rules that earns God's acceptance. He spends eleven chapters showing us what God has done in Christ. Then he asks what our response should be.

These chapters began as six sermons. I have brought them together here as a continuous study. We will consider our relationship with God, the world around us, ourselves, other believers, and those who have harmed us. In each relationship, the question is the same: Will the mercy we have received become visible in the way we live?

Chapter 1 — The Way of Romans 12

Romans 12 is one of the clearest pictures in Scripture of a mature follower of Jesus. Paul speaks about worship, the way we think, the gifts we have been given, the people we serve, and even the enemies we would rather avoid. He does not leave spiritual maturity in the realm of an idea. He brings it into our everyday relationships.

One verse in this chapter has stayed with me: Romans 12:12 calls us to rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, and remain constant in prayer. Those instructions matter when life is painful. They also matter when life is going well. Prosperity brings its own temptations, just as trouble brings its own pressures. In both seasons, hope, patience, and prayer keep us anchored in Jesus.

But before we move into Paul's instructions, we need to hear his first words. Romans 12 begins with “therefore” and appeals to “the mercies of God” (Romans 12:1). That word connects this chapter to everything that came before it. Paul has been explaining that religious performance cannot make us right with God. Even on our best day, we cannot earn the standing that Christ gives by grace. Through Jesus, God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. His mercy is the ground beneath everything Paul now asks us to do.

That matters because it is possible to read Romans 12 as a demanding moral checklist. We can look at it and think, “I need to try harder to become this kind of person.” Paul gives us a different starting point. He does not say, “Become good enough, and then God will show you mercy.” He says that, because of God's mercy, we can offer our lives to him. The Christian life is a response to grace.

This is why surrender is worship. Paul asks us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. He means more than the part of life we call religious. Our work, our meals, our conversations, our choices, our time, and our relationships belong before God. We do not offer these things to buy his love. We offer them because he has already shown us his love in Christ.

From that starting point, the rest of the chapter takes shape. First, we respond to God with surrender. Then we respond to the values around us with a renewed mind rather than simply copying them. We look at ourselves with sober judgment. We use our gifts and love sincerely in the family of faith. Finally, we face hostility without returning evil for evil. Each response grows out of the same mercy.

The order is important. A church can talk about service and still forget grace. A believer can try to love an enemy and discover that willpower alone is not enough. Romans 12 is not a program for building an impressive religious image. It is a picture of what God forms in people who have encountered his mercy and yielded themselves to him.

So when Paul tells us to rejoice in hope and remain patient in trouble, he is not asking us to pretend that pain is pleasant. Hope gives us a reason to hold on while trouble is real. Prayer keeps us connected to God when our strength is small. Patience grows in the very circumstances where we wish we did not need it. Our joy can take root deeper than our present situation because it is anchored in Jesus.

I want to invite you to read Romans 12 with that foundation in mind. Do not rush to ask whether you have mastered every command. Begin by remembering what God has done for you. Then ask where his mercy is calling for a real response in your life. That is where this journey begins.

Chapter 2 — What Does God Want from Me?

“What does God really want from me?” It is a large question because the answer reaches into every part of life. Romans 12:1 answers it with one word: surrender.

We often hear surrender as though God were trying to take something valuable from us. Jesus tells two short stories that challenge that assumption. In Matthew 13:44–46, one person discovers treasure hidden in a field; another finds a pearl of great value. Each gives up what he has to gain what he has found. Jesus says the first man acts in joy. He sees the worth of the treasure, so his decision makes sense to him.

The point is not that we can purchase God's kingdom. We cannot. The point is that, when we begin to see the worth of belonging to him, everything else is put in a different light. Surrender is costly, but it is not a foolish loss. The man in the parable does not leave the field grieving over the things he sold. He has found a greater treasure.

That is a very different motivation from fear or guilt. Some people try to follow Jesus because they are afraid of punishment. Others feel that they must give up enough to prove they are serious. Jesus places joy before the decision to sell. The worth of the treasure changes the way the man sees what he owns. Likewise, the mercy of God changes the way we understand our lives.

Paul's appeal comes “by the mercies of God.” He has already told us that our best efforts cannot make us righteous. Christ has come to do what we could not do, and we receive the gift of right standing with God by faith. Grace is not permission to remain unchanged. It is the reason we can entrust ourselves to the One who has loved us so fully.

What, then, do we surrender? Paul says to present our bodies. That means our actual lives, not merely a feeling during worship or a promise made at an altar. Surrender touches the way we use our time and resources. It reaches our plans, priorities, habits, and relationships. It asks whether we will follow Jesus when his way challenges the one we would have chosen for ourselves.

This can feel frightening. We may trust Jesus to forgive us while hesitating to let him lead us. We may want to know every destination before we take the next step. But surrender grows from trust in God's character. If the One asking for our lives is the One who gave himself for us, then we can bring our fears to him honestly.

That does not mean every sacrifice is easy or that faith will make us wealthy. Jesus does not promise that the cost disappears. The parables teach us to recognize a kingdom whose value cannot be measured by what we temporarily give up. Following Christ may involve loss, and some losses are painful. Yet the life found in him is worth our wholehearted response.

We also have to distinguish surrender from passivity. Presenting ourselves to God is a decision we live out again and again. We seek his will in a difficult conversation. We choose integrity when dishonesty would serve us. We let him reorder a priority we have guarded. We put our gifts at the service of others. Each choice says, in a practical way, “My life belongs to you.”

So what does God want from me? Not an impressive religious performance. Not a carefully managed version of myself. He calls me to bring my whole life before him. The mercy that saved me is also the mercy that teaches me to surrender.

Chapter 3 — What Does God Want for Me?

If surrender is our response to God, what kind of life does he want to form in us? Romans 12:2 says we are not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed through the renewal of our minds. As our thinking changes, we learn to discern what is good and pleasing to God.

That command can sound like a call to withdraw from everyone around us. Yet Paul spent his life among people who did not share his beliefs. He adapted the way he approached different communities for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:20–23). He could enter their world without allowing their values to become the authority over his life.

There is a tension here. We belong to God's kingdom, but we live and work in this world. We go to school, raise families, make friends, and share the concerns of our neighbors. Jesus prayed for his disciples in precisely this setting. He did not ask the Father to remove them from the world. He asked that they be kept from evil, sanctified in truth, and sent into the world (John 17:15–18).

Being different from the world, then, does not mean refusing to love the people in it. And engaging with people does not require us to take on every value the culture offers. We are sent to be present, truthful, and loving. That takes discernment.

I think of a tightrope. It has to be anchored and held with enough tension for someone to cross. A rope with no tension cannot carry anyone. In a similar way, a believer needs firm convictions and a willingness to move toward people. If we lose our convictions, we have nothing distinctive to offer. If we retreat from people, we fail to live out the love that sent Jesus into the world.

We see the fullness of truth and mercy in Christ. He entered the human condition and sympathizes with our weakness, yet remained without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He did not treat people as though holiness required distance from them. Nor did his nearness make truth unimportant. His life shows us that faithful presence and faithfulness to the Father belong together.

How do we live that way? Paul brings us back to the mind. We cannot simply follow every impulse and expect a different life to emerge. Our thoughts and attitudes need to be renewed by the Spirit. We take in Scripture, learn the truth found in Christ, and let God expose the patterns we have accepted without question (see Ephesians 4:20–23). We ask

whether a desire or assumption reflects his Word. We allow others to help us see what we have missed.

Renewal is more than collecting information. It changes what we love, what we trust, and how we make decisions. A person may know the right answer to a question and still be drawn toward status, fear, resentment, or self-protection. God works at that deeper level. As we offer our lives to him, the Spirit reshapes the way we see.

This is why Paul's language of discernment matters. He does not promise a detailed map for every decision. He describes people being transformed so that they can test and recognize what is good. We learn to ask, “Does this reflect the truth of Christ? Does this choice honor God and love my neighbor?” Those questions reach into ordinary life, where most of our decisions are made.

What does God want for us? He wants us to know and walk in his will. That is not a promise that every circumstance will be comfortable. It is the gift of becoming people who can live faithfully within the world he has sent us to love.

Chapter 4 — The Real You

Most of us carry three questions, whether we say them aloud or not: Who am I? Where do I belong? Why am I here? They are questions of identity, security, and significance.

We often answer them with our work, our family role, our accomplishments, or the approval of a group. Those things can matter deeply, but they cannot bear the full weight of telling us who we are. When our sense of worth depends entirely on them, we begin to manage how others see us. We may copy a person we admire or hide the parts of ourselves we fear people will reject.

Genesis 3 shows how far back this struggle goes. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they hid. Adam said he was afraid because he was naked. The question God asked—“Where are you?”—was not a request for directions. It brought Adam face to face with what had happened. Shame had entered a relationship that had once been open. When God confronted him, Adam blamed Eve, and his answer also pointed back toward God (Genesis 3:8–12).

We recognize the pattern. Fear tells us that, if people knew the real us, they would leave. Insecurity tells us to hide. Denial tells us to put the blame somewhere else. Some of us defend ourselves by appearing strong and untouchable. Others withdraw and decide that change is impossible. Either way, the distance grows between the person we present and the person we are.

This matters because love requires honesty. If I spend all my energy maintaining an image, I cannot receive another person's love freely. I wonder whether they care for me or only for the version of me I have shown them. Nor can I serve them well if every interaction is about protecting my own position.

Paul addresses this in Romans 12:3. He tells believers not to think of themselves more highly than they ought, but to think with sober judgment. Sober judgment does not mean thinking as little of ourselves as possible. It means seeing ourselves accurately before God. We acknowledge our gifts without boasting, our need without despair, and our sin without hiding behind excuses.

The rest of Romans 12:3–8 places that honest self-understanding within the body of Christ. We do not all have the same function. Our gifts are given by grace and are meant to serve

others. I do not need to become a copy of another person to have a place in God's work. Nor do I need to diminish someone else's calling to make mine matter.

The gospel goes deeper than self-improvement. Romans 5 contrasts the ruin that came through Adam with the grace and life given through Jesus Christ. The fall explains why shame and fear have such a hold on us; it does not have the final word over those who belong to Christ. Our identity is grounded in what Jesus has done, not merely in what went wrong with us or what other people have said about us.

That gives us a way to answer the three questions. Who am I? In Christ, I am someone who has received mercy and is being made new. Where do I belong? I belong to him and to the people with whom he has joined me. Why am I here? My life and gifts can be offered in love for his purposes. These answers do not remove every struggle with shame or insecurity overnight. They give us solid ground on which to face those struggles truthfully.

The real you does not emerge by pretending you have no weaknesses. The real you can step out of hiding because God's grace gives you room to tell the truth. Start there. Look at yourself with sober judgment, and let the mercy of Christ shape what you see.

Chapter 5 — Real Relationships

Why do people who sincerely want to grow in Christ sometimes feel stuck? They attend worship, read Scripture, and pray, yet certain habits and wounds seem to remain unchanged. Sometimes the question is not only what they are learning. It is the environment in which they are trying to grow.

Jesus described seed falling on different kinds of ground in Matthew 13. The condition of the soil matters to the growth. Scripture is good seed, but we should not imagine that spiritual growth happens in isolation from the relationships and practices surrounding our lives. We need honest hearts and an environment where truth is lived together.

Jesus formed his disciples in relationship. They traveled and ate together. They saw him serve, heard him teach, received correction, and learned to care for one another. In John 13, Jesus washed their feet and then commanded them to love as he had loved them. He did not merely explain service. He knelt down and showed it. Titles did not carry the lesson; the towel did.

The early church continued in that pattern. Acts 2:42–47 describes people devoted to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, shared meals, prayer, and the needs of others. They were learning the Word of God within a community that practiced it. The church was more than an event people attended before returning to unrelated lives.

Romans 12:9–13 gives us a picture of that kind of life together. Paul calls for sincere love, genuine affection, honor, energetic service, hope, patience, prayer, generosity, and hospitality. These are not decorations added to a healthy church. They are part of how a healthy church is formed.

Real community begins when the real you shows up. Paul warns against love that only appears genuine. We all need wisdom about where and how we share our lives; honesty does not mean telling every person every detail. But lasting relationships cannot grow if we always arrive in character, carefully presenting an image that keeps others at a safe distance.

Then the real you begins to notice real needs. Love looks beyond a polite greeting to the person who needs encouragement, a meal, a place at the table, or someone who will listen. Paul tells us to take delight in honoring one another. That requires humility. It asks us to care about another person's good, not merely about the role we play in helping them.

Our motives matter too. Service can become another way to seek recognition. It is easy to help someone and quietly wait for the thanks we think we deserve. When it does not come, resentment reveals what we hoped to receive. Paul calls us to serve the Lord with diligence. That frees us to give our best while remembering whom we ultimately serve.

And he tells us how to keep going: rejoice in hope, be patient in trouble, and keep praying. We look upward to God even as we look outward to meet needs. Hospitality and generosity are not reserved for the weeks when life is easy. Hope sustains us as we continue to make room for others.

None of this means that a church will be free of pain or conflict. People bring wounds into every community. But the answer is not to abandon the work of love. It is to become a people who can tell the truth, receive grace, meet needs, and keep returning to the way of Jesus.

If you feel spiritually stuck, consider who is walking with you. Is there a place where you can be honest and where you can serve? The Word of God is meant to take root in our lives. Real relationships give us a place to practice what we have heard.

Chapter 6 — Overcome Evil with Good

Think of someone who has hurt you deeply. The injury may have come through betrayal, abandonment, abuse, or words that changed the way you saw yourself. Romans 12 does not treat that pain as imaginary. Paul speaks directly to what happens when evil is aimed at us.

Jesus commanded his followers to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:43–48). Paul continues that teaching in Romans 12:14–21. He tells us to bless rather than curse, to refuse revenge, to pursue peace as far as it depends on us, and to respond to need with good. The chapter closes with a call to overcome evil by doing good.

That sounds impossible when we rely only on ourselves. In one sense, it is. Romans 12 follows eleven chapters about God's mercy for a reason. We do not manufacture this love through sheer force of will. We receive grace and ask the Holy Spirit to form a response in us that our wounded instincts would never choose on their own.

Blessing someone who has hurt us does not mean pretending that the harm was harmless. It means we no longer wish for evil to have the last word in either life. We can pray for repentance, truth, and the person's ultimate good. We can refuse to feed our own desire for revenge. Sometimes this work begins long before our feelings change.

Forgiveness is often a choice and a continuing process. We may decide to release a claim to personal retaliation, then find the anger returning the next day. We bring it back to God. We make the decision again. Some wounds take time, wise support, and patient care. Forgiveness does not erase accountability, require trust to be restored immediately, or oblige anyone to return to an unsafe relationship. Paul himself says, “if it is possible” and “as far as it depends on you” when he speaks of living at peace (Romans 12:18).

Paul also calls us to share the joy and sorrow of others and to live without pride (Romans 12:15–16). Within the chapter's movement toward blessing even those who oppose us, these commands challenge our impulse to delight when a rival suffers. A person's hardship is not a victory for us. Humility remembers that we too have needed mercy.

That does not mean every wound should be addressed by a dramatic visit or an immediate reconciliation. Wisdom asks what is safe, truthful, and appropriate. Doing good may mean a private prayer, a refusal to spread a damaging story, or practical help when it can be

offered responsibly. It will never require us to cover up abuse or abandon the protection of someone vulnerable.

Paul's prohibition on revenge is equally clear. He does not ask us to call evil good. He asks us to leave ultimate judgment to God rather than appoint ourselves as the ones who must settle every account. This allows us to pursue truth and appropriate justice without becoming governed by retaliation.

Why would we live this way? Because it reflects what Christ has done for us. Romans 5 says that God showed his love for us while we were still sinners. We were not loved because we had made ourselves easy to love. Mercy came to us first. Remembering that mercy changes the way we face people whose actions have wounded us, even when the path forward remains difficult.

Paul's final words are a challenge and a promise of direction: do not let evil conquer you; overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). The wrong done to you need not become the pattern you pass on. By the grace of God, you can refuse to repeat it. You can entrust judgment to him, practice wise boundaries, and choose the next faithful act.

That is what it means to dare to be real. We do not hide our hurt or claim an easy victory. We bring our whole selves before the God of mercy and let his grace shape the way we live.