

Sermon Growth Guide

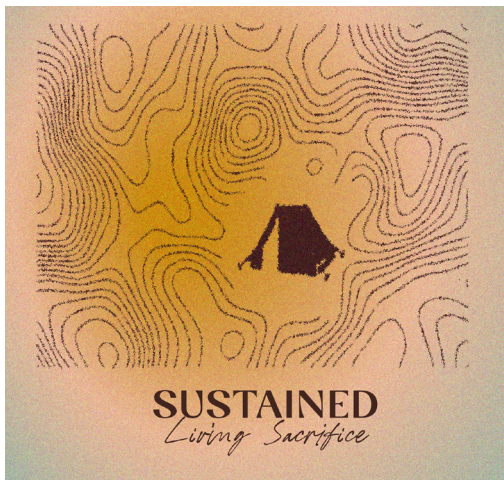
Author: Suzanne Gradin

SUSTAINED | Romans 12:14-21

August 16, 2026

Key Verse: Romans 12:21 - "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Big Idea: "The Jesus way is what changes the world."



Foundations

This week we continue in Romans, in our theme of A Living Sacrifice. This whole chapter shows what it looks like for us to lay ourselves out – to be humble, transformed, devoted, and willing to be one part of the body of Christ.

This passage asks us to be a living sacrifice by choosing to both realize and act like the world does not revolve around us. Our emotions, our pain, our accomplishments, our revenge, are all to be laid at the feet of Jesus. We are called to love our neighbors in spite of each of these things. This is what it is to 'put on love.' The beginning of chapter twelve asks us to offer our bodies as a 'living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.' This is a choice - to empty ourselves of our tendency to focus on our selves and instead for Christ to renew our minds so we can focus on the good and wellbeing of others. We don't simply forget those many things that we lay down at Jesus' feet, but rather trust that any wrongs done us will be avenged by the Lord. This is also how we 'live at peace with everyone,' by recognizing that God sees us and will take revenge when needed. We can live at peace and love others when we know that God stands behind us.

Pastor Tim wisely points out, however, that there are limits to our responsibility. We do not need to stay in abusive relationships. As Pastor Tim mentioned, 'Own (what depends on you), have peace before the Lord, and move on.'

Understanding God's Word

Together, read Romans 12:14-21. Here we read so many instructions that go against human nature. We often seek vengeance. We aren't humble. We feel justified in our treatment of others. What are we called to instead? Which of these is the hardest for you to swallow?

Applying God's Word

This entire passage is about application. We are called to bless others, rejoice, mourn, live in harmony, be humble, not repay anyone evil for evil, live at peace, feed our enemies, and overcome evil with good. Which of these is hardest for you to do? Do any come naturally? Are there any that you have grown in? Pray about it. What is God leading to grow you in now?

Witnessing God's Word

Pastor Tim points out in the sermon that "The Jesus Way is what changes the world." How would your world change if you consistently returned evil for good, and sought humility and peace? How would the world change if more people didn't seek vengeance? What is one tangible change that you can make today to practice what this passage preaches?

How do some trees last and others fall? Some even withstand wildfire. Do you ever look at a tree and imagine everything it endured to make it so long? I do like the saying, “an oak tree is just a nut that held its ground.” Holding your ground isn’t as easy as it sounds. Some businesses rise and crash while others last for generations. Some restaurants open and close. Some churches shoot up and fall over. Abigail and I lived in DC for the first year we were married. I remember walking a trail through some woods after a hurricane had skirted the coast. There were big, solid, old trees and there were tall, thin trees that seemed to shoot up quick. Lots of thin trees were down; the strong trees just looked a little irritated. As I walked and prayed, I asked the Lord to lead me into a big-tree kind of ministry. Jesus taught, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.” (John 15:16) I don’t mind excitement. I pray for healthy growth. But I long for fruit that will last. First Pres meets her 154th Birthday tomorrow! That’s a reason to give thanks.

We wrap up Romans 12 today. Living Sacrifice: Sustained. Romans 12 reshapes us, restores our Christian DNA when we get a little confused and conformed to the world around us. Romans 12 is like a list of exercises from your Physical Therapist. At the end here, it turns a little more to Christian community; group exercises. How does Christian community handle conflict? How does a living-sacrifice Christian respond when others cause them harm? How does Christian community last? In some ways, we are just like everyone else. We bring our rough edges, our personalities, our unmet needs and immature behavior, we carry all of that right into church! If you think everyone you see here is perfect, you haven’t hung around long enough. In one of my first sermons ten years ago I said, “Some of you are really happy with who the search team chose,

some of you are disappointed. Don’t worry. Give it some time. Eventually you’ll all get the chance to be disappointed!” There is just no way to lead and keep everyone happy all the time; hopefully you are able to see the Lord at work behind the leadership in place. We are just people. But we have extraordinary powers. We are the Church, the Body of Christ, imbued with extraordinary capabilities and supernatural strength! We are like Peter Parker, bit by the Holy Spirit. We can be sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Did you hear this list? There isn’t a single thing on there that’s easy! “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” (Romans 12:14) Easy enough? Persecution was real for Paul. He was often arrested, sometimes beaten, regularly imprisoned and eventually executed. Do you hold blessing in your heart for your attackers? To bless is to go to God praying for their care and goodness. This is love for enemies. Most people measure influence by their ability to help their friends and crush their enemies. Jesus said, “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:44) When Jesus was dying on the cross, do you remember what he said? “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’” (Luke 23:34) Which in the end is more powerful? Crushing your enemies or demonstrating that you can bless them even as they attempt to crush you? The Jesus way is what changes the world.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” (Romans 12:15) It is not easy to step toward the hurting. Sometimes they don’t understand their own actions in the rawness, the pain of loss. Nobody likes to feel sadness. It is hard to move toward the hurt, but aren’t those also privileged places to be with friends? Pastor Jonathan Miller taught me ministry back in New Jersey. Jonathan

was quick to get to the hospital, to the house, wherever the pain was. He took me along. People would say, "I'm so sorry you had to come." Jonathan would always say, "It's a privilege." It is. I felt privileged to be in sacred spaces. Step toward a mourner this week. And celebrate a celebration! Rejoice when there is something to rejoice about! As Cicero said, a friend doubles our joys and divides our grief.

"Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." (Romans 12:16) Pride and conceit destroy community, don't they? Major in humility if you want to cultivate community. Value harmony. Don't be so about your reputation that you turn away from, as Paul says, "people of low position." The poor. Those who cannot return whatever favor you give. There are a lot of events where there is jockeying, people want to be seen with people. Authentic Christian community sees every person with the eyes of Jesus worthy of full love, value, and time. Be the one who moves toward the person who seems forgotten, like Jesus did.

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone." (Romans 12:17) Of course our first impulse to taking a hit is to return a hit. The Word is clear, evil for evil only doubles evil. There must be another way, a Jesus way. "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." (Romans 12:18-19) If it were up to us to take vengeance, the world would be a disaster. It's pretty close as it is. Miroslav Volf, a theologian who survived the Balkan Wars as a child, pointed out that the idea of a God who does not take vengeance is a foolish notion dreamt up by comfortable intellectuals. For those

who have suffered evil, a God who brings justice is a comfort. Without that trust, that vengeance belongs to the Lord, you would either be eaten up inside by your inability to return vengeance upon your enemies; or, worse, you would find a way to exact vengeance and live the rest of your life in the pain of redoubled evil and death and regret. Let God handle it. Thank God he does. Then this curious verse: "On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'" (Romans 12:20) "Yeah! Now we're talking! Toss some barbecue charcoals at that dude!" It undoes everything we have just been talking about, doesn't it? It's from Proverbs. Even there it takes a little explanation. One possibility is there was an ancient Egyptian ritual where a penitent person would carry a bowl of coals on their head when they visited someone to ask for forgiveness. That may be the reference. Kindness will lead to repentance. Your kindness will prompt them to perform this ceremony. Maybe, but at the base of it is the trust that all these feelings of animosity and desire to avenge have to be handed over to God, and let God figure out the rest. Do kindness to your enemies. Forgive. Let God do the rest and trust it will be right. You will be satisfied. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:21) Evil cannot overcome evil, only good can do that. Darkness cannot overcome darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot overcome hate, only love can do that. The Jesus way. It's supernatural. It's extraordinary. It changes the world. What a challenge! Not one thing in there is easy. How will it be sustained?

One important note we might have missed. Forgiveness, yes. Trust in God's justice, yes. Harmony, yes. And watch this note, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:18) What does that say? There are limits to your responsibility. One of the tragedies of the Christian life is when these beautiful Christian distinctives, love for enemies and profound forgiveness, are manipulated by bad actors to become the Devil's playground.

Someone says, “You are required by your faith to stay in my reach so I can keep hurting you, and you have to forgive me while I’m doing it.” No. You are not required by this or any other verse of the Bible to continue to participate in an abusive relationship. I’m not advocating for cancel culture, but the Bible says again and again that when it comes to relentless abuse, the most loving thing to do is to step away. Get out. Get help. You are not required to keep getting hurt for Jesus. He took the hurt for you.

Now here is the extraordinary thing: you can still forgive. “Wait, how can I forgive if they don’t change? If they haven’t asked for forgiveness.” You can forgive. You need to forgive, whether the abuser is repentant or not, in the picture or not, you need to forgive for your own sake. Harboring unforgiveness is like eating rat poison and expecting it to hurt the other person. You can forgive because Christ has forgiven you. But you can’t control another person’s response. “If it is possible; as far as it depends on you.” Own those, have peace before the Lord, and move on.

What a list. What an exercise. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed, Romans 12 says. Don’t just take the shape of the world around you. As an individual, as a man, you are a different man. As a woman, you are a different woman. As a community, Church, you are a different community. I’ll never forget how the church in Egypt gained the freedom to plant churches. On August 14, 2013, supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood were put down by the government and hundreds were killed. A wave of attacks on Christians swept the nation, dozens of churches burned, hundreds of Christian businesses destroyed. The next step would be total civil war.

The leaders of the Catholic, Coptic and Evangelical (Presbyterian) churches all met. They were given time on national television. They declared, “We will take no vengeance. We will love as Christ loved us. Let there be peace.” The President of Egypt said, “Your leadership kept our country from civil war. What do you need?” Restrictions were lifted. Churches were planted and filled faster than they can be planned. Muslims are showing up on Christian’s doorsteps saying, “I want to know Jesus.” Our brothers and sisters in Egypt never imagined they would see a season like this.

That’s Romans 12. That’s the Jesus way. That’s what changes the world. That is fruit that lasts. An oak in the storm. That’s who you can be. That’s who we can be. A Living Sacrifice. How can it be sustained? How can we keep this laundry list of rights and wrongs? To sum it up: be like Jesus. Live like Jesus. Jesus is the true living sacrifice. He gave up his Spirit on the cross so we could live by his Spirit today. We lay our lives down for Christ, because he laid his life down for us.