

Lesson 50 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 5:6-8

Romans 5:6-8 — For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

How is verse 6 related to verse 5? The first word in verse 6 answers that question — it is the word **for**. That word tells us that verse 6 is an explanation of verse 5.

We know from verse 5 that God's love has been poured into our heart through what God has told us through the Holy Spirit, but what is the best example of that? What is the best example of something God has told us that caused us to understand how much God loves us?

Verses 6-8 answer that question. These verses show us that, not only does God love us, but God's love far exceeds any notion of human love. And this great example of God's love is not just a platitude or a feeling, but rather this great example of God's love is a concrete historical fact that can be objectively verified.

And what is this great example that shows God's great love? It is the fact that Jesus died for his enemies. God sent his only begotten Son into this world to die for sinners. That is what God did, and it is nothing like what the world does.

Mankind does not love its enemies; mankind hates its enemies. Mankind does not die for its enemies; mankind tries to destroy its

enemies. Mankind does not help its enemies when they are weak; mankind kicks its enemies when they are down. The love of God far surpasses the love of mankind.

But why two different words? Verse 6 says that Jesus died for us while we were still **weak**, while verse 8 says that Jesus died for us while we were still **sinners**. Why the difference?

The Calvinistic view of “weak” is that it means a total incapacity for good. And that is what they teach about all of us — that we are incapable of doing anything good until and unless the Holy Spirit changes us. We talked about that false notion back in Lessons 33 and 34 when we looked at Romans 3:10-12. As you recall, we quoted one well-known Calvinist, who said:

“Apart from the indwelling Holy Spirit people cannot exhibit this fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). They have no inner spiritual capacity whereby they can normally and automatically exercise genuine kindness toward others. Instead sin causes them to be selfish and self-centered.”

But we also saw how just a single verse is enough to demolish that false view.

Acts 28:2 — The native people showed us **unusual kindness**, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold.

That certainly sounds like genuine kindness to me! In fact, the Bible calls it “unusual kindness.” And there is no basis at all for saying that their unusual kindness somehow came from the Holy Spirit.

Calvin says that man is incapable of doing anything good, but the Bible teaches the opposite. And, in any event, what Calvin says is

much more than what Paul needs to say here. Paul does not need to show that I am never good, but instead Paul needs to show only that I am not always good. And Paul has already shown that. We are all sinners — and just a single sin is enough to put me in that category. My problem is not that I can't do **anything** good; my problem is that I can't do **everything** good.

So, if “weak” does not mean “incapable of doing anything good,” what does it mean? Doesn't verse 8 answer that question? Both the word “weak” in verse 6 and the word “sinners” in verse 8 are describing the same group — those for whom Christ died. And for whom did Christ die? Christ died for the lost! Christ died for those who are spiritually sick!

Luke 19:10 — For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Matthew 9:12 — But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”

Jesus died for sinners. That is what those verses tell us and what verse 8 tells us right here. Jesus died for the ungodly — that is what verse 6 tells us. Those are all the same group — the lost in Luke 19, the sick in Matthew 9, the sinners in verse 8, and the ungodly in verse 6.

But why are they called “weak” in verse 6? Don't we already know the answer to that question? We have four chapters of Romans under our belt so far — hasn't Paul already answered that question in those chapters? I think he has.

Before we obeyed the gospel, we were all weak. Not weak in the sense that we were incapable of doing anything good, but weak

in the sense that we had sinned and we were incapable of saving ourselves through our own efforts. That, in fact, is the definition of weakness — an inability to do something by my own strength. And that is precisely where we all were when it came to overcoming the problem of sin. As the Psalmist says, we were unable to keep ourselves alive (Psalm 22:29). We were weak, or as Jesus describes us in Matthew 9:12, we were sick. We needed help.

We were lawbreakers, which meant that we were enemies of Christ and enemies of God. And what happens when we meet up with our own enemies when they are weak? How do we respond? That is when we strike! That is when we take advantage of their weakness! That is how man responds, but that is not how God responded.

Jesus died for us while we were weak. Jesus saw our weakness, and he then supplied the strength that we lacked. Jesus died to do for us what we were unable to do for ourselves. And Jesus did all of that while we were his enemies. Verse 10 will soon tell us that.

If anyone ever asks you why you believe that God loves you, this should be your first answer to that question. It was certainly Paul's first answer to that question. To Paul, this historical fact about Jesus was the best evidence of God's love for mankind. Jesus showed his love for his enemies by dying for them! And we were those enemies!

Let's look next at verse 7, which is a difficult verse to understand. Here is what it says: "For one will scarcely die for a **righteous** person — though perhaps for a **good** person one would dare even to die."

What Paul says in that verse is that it is more unthinkable that someone might die for a righteous person than for a good person. But why? What is the difference between a righteous person and a good person?

Some suggest those two words are being used as synonyms here, but I don't see how that is possible given that they are treated differently. Yes, good and righteous might be synonyms in some contexts, but Paul is certainly not treating them as synonyms in verse 7. They must have a different meaning.

Why would I be more likely to die for a good person than for a righteous person? How can I even tell the difference between a righteous person and a good person? What is the difference? And what makes that good person more worthy than that righteous person?

Let's start with a wrong answer — a very wrong answer! The article shown on the right side of the Handout for Lesson 50 considers six answers to our question about verse 7, and here is the third answer considered (but thankfully rejected!) by that article:

"A third position ... is to suggest that Paul, having made the statement in [the first half of verse 7], immediately realizes that it is both rash and untrue. His reaction is to withdraw it hastily, although somewhat clumsily, with a correction in the second part of the verse."

One proponent of that view even suggests that Paul intended to retract his initial, inappropriate comment, but Tertius (his scribe) failed to delete it and thus it remains.

It would be hard to think up an answer to our question about verse 7 that is more wrong or more egotistical than that one! They can't understand what Paul is saying, and so their only answer is that Paul

must have made a mistake. Well, they are half right — a mistake has most definitely been made, but Paul is not the one who made it! The mistake is theirs and theirs alone. There is nothing rash or inappropriate or mistaken about verse 7.

As I mentioned, that article considers six possible answers to our questions about verse 7, and you can download a copy of the article using the link at the bottom of the Handout if you want to consider all six possibilities (or I should say, the remaining five possibilities given that we have already scratched the third one off the list!).

Having looked at all of them, I think the best answer is the fifth answer discussed in that article, and it is an answer that would have been immediately understood by someone in first century Rome but that is completely foreign to us. That answer comes from the Greco-Roman patronage system, something that was well understood by everyone who first received this letter from Paul.

But that system is not well known to us. What is this Greco-Roman patronage system, and what makes anyone think it is being discussed in verse 7?

In the Greek and Roman world of the first-century, there was no social safety net for those at the lower levels of society. Instead, such a person would often rely instead on a personal relationship with a wealthy patron.

That patron would view that lower-level person as his client, and the relationship between the patron and the client ran in both directions. The patron helped the client with material goods, legal assistance, employment, and political protection, while the client gave the patron

honor and loyalty — often walking with him, praising him in public, defending his name, and standing ready to do whatever was asked.

The key thing to note in that system is that the gift from the patron created a debt for the client. These were not charitable donations by the patron. The benefit placed the client under a social obligation, and failing to honor that obligation was regarded as a terrible vice.

And this system often scaled up from one client to many clients. A very wealthy patron, for example, might fund a city's grain supply or pay for the annual games. The entire city would then be expected to respond with statues, inscriptions, or honorary titles — including calling the patron a good man.

Please look again at the Handout for Lesson 50. The left side of the Handout shows a page in the original Greek, not a page from the Bible, but a page from a first-century secular document written by a man who went by the name Dio Chrysostom. He was a Greek orator who was born around AD 40 and died around AD 115. About 80 of his orations survive, and the one shown on the Handout is Oration No. 31.

This oration was directed to the people of Rhodes, who were neglecting their benefactors. How you ask? Well, rather than building statues of their patrons as expected, they were instead just attaching new nameplates to old statues! Apparently, that was quite the social *faux pas* in the first-century Roman Empire!

But that specific issue is not what is important for our discussion on Romans 5:7. Instead, what is important is how that issue is explained — and, in particular, the words that are chosen in that explanation. Here, as shown on the Handout near the bottom of the box at the top

of the middle column, is one thing that was said about those people who were neglecting their benefactors:

“How very much worse it is to rob **good men** of honors bestowed than to rob anyone else, and to injure your benefactors than to injure any chance person.”

That sounds a bit like verse 7:

For one will scarcely die for a righteous person — though perhaps for **a good person** one would dare even to die.

In fact, the Greek phrase translated “a good person” in verse 7 (highlighted in green) is just the singular form of the Greek phrase translated “good men” in the quotation about the benefactors in Rhodes. And other evidence we could also review confirms that the phrase “good man” or “good men” was commonly used to describe patrons or benefactors who helped their clients, either individuals or cities.

And look at the blue highlighted text. That text makes a distinction between someone who has harmed no one, but who has also given you no benefit and so has generated no debt of gratitude, versus someone else who has actively done good for you and so has a claim on your gratitude. And that latter person is described in this contemporaneous document using the same Greek word that is translated “a good man” in Romans 5:7 (highlighted in green) and is also called a “benefactor” (as shown in the blue box).

If that is what is going on in verse 7, then suddenly the verse makes complete sense, and we can see immediately the difference between “a righteous person” and “a good person.” The righteous person would be a person who was upright and honest, but who had never

done anything for you. The good person would be a benefactor who had helped you and to whom you owed a social obligation.

And I think that word “righteous” in the ESV translation is better translated “just.” In fact, the adverb form of that same word also appears on the Handout, where it is translated “justly” as shown with the light red highlighting. It is the same Greek word we find in Matthew 5:45 when God sends rain on the just and the unjust.

Yes, such a person could be called just, but even so it would have been unthinkable to die for such a person. You might admire them; but you would not die for them. After all, what had they ever done for you? You didn’t owe them anything — much less your life!

But the good person in verse 7 would be one of those benefactors with whom you had a social contract. That person had done something for you, perhaps a great deal for you, and so you owed them something — but did you owe them your life? Unlikely, but maybe. It is at least in the realm of possibility, and so you might dare to die for such a person. And, again, that is exactly what verse 7 says:

For one will scarcely die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.

I think what Paul is saying in verse 7 is that a client dying for his patron is the ceiling of human sacrificial love. That would be the most a man might be willing to do, and even then it would be unlikely. And notice the direction there — the client is dying for the benefactor.

But then look at what verse 8 does. Verse 8 inverts the whole system. In verse 8, the benefactor dies for the client! And not just any client, but a client who owes the patron everything, who has given the pa-

tron nothing, and who, in fact, is the patron's enemy despite all that the patron has done for him!

What Paul has done here is walk us right to the ceiling of human sacrificial love, and has then shown us that God's sacrificial love is infinitely greater than what we find at mankind's ceiling.

God's love is nothing like our love — it exceeds it in every way — and every Roman would have understood that immediately from Paul's example in verse 7.

But we have another question about these three verses — what does verse 6 mean when it says that Jesus died for the ungodly “at the right time”? What does that mean?

Some say that this right time was the time when we were weak, but that doesn't really make much sense to me. We were always weak, and we would have stayed weak had Jesus not come. There was no doubt that if Jesus came to die for us he would do that when we were weak. We were always weak; that was not a question of timing.

I think a much better answer comes to us from a parallel passage that we find in Galatians.

Galatians 4:4-5 — But when **the fullness of time** had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

I think the fullness of time in Galatians 4 is the same as the right time in Romans 5 — and that time is when God sent forth his Son. But why was that time the right time? Why was that time in the fullness of time?

The answer to that question opens the door to a fascinating study about the history of the ancient world. While we won't take the time here to walk through that door, we will take the time to peek inside!

It was no accident that Jesus came into this world when and where he did. God created the perfect setting for Jesus to come and establish his eternal kingdom, the church. How was it the perfect setting?

We looked at that question when we studied the prophecies in Zechariah about Alexander the Great. After the death of Alexander, his empire was divided up among his generals, and as was often the case, Palestine quickly became a battlefield.

But the spread of the gospel would have been greatly hindered if that constant warfare had been allowed to continue. And so the fourth kingdom, Rome, put an end to it and brought instead the famous *pax Romana*, the Roman peace. Here is how Wikipedia describes it:

Pax Romana (Latin for Roman peace) was the long period of relative peace and minimal expansion by military force experienced by the Roman Empire in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. ... Its span was approximately 206 years (27 BC to 180 AD). The pax Romana is said to be a "miracle" [in quotes] because prior to it there had never been peace for that many centuries in a given area of human history.

We don't need those quotation marks around the word "miracle" in that description! That peace was the work of God. The importance of the Roman peace, the *pax Romana*, cannot be overstated. The Greeks' hobby was war. The church would have had a much more difficult time reaching beyond Jerusalem had the Greeks still been in charge.

But the perfect cradle for Christ and his kingdom was not just Rome, but it was Greece and Rome, the Greco-Roman Empire. The Greek language, which had been around since 800 BC and in which the New Testament was penned, had twice the vocabulary of Latin.

Those who believe that Christianity is anti-intellectual and irrational should note that Christianity began at a time of Greek intellectualism and rationality, and again that was no accident. It is no accident that the church was established, not in a time of superstition, but in a time of rational inquiry. Greek thought is admired even to this very day. In fact, it has been said that the Greek contribution to Western philosophy was Western philosophy!

So you have the Greek language and Greek rationality combined with Roman peace across the known world. To this day, historians puzzle over how that all came to be, but Bible believers don't have to puzzle over it at all.

If you really want a faith-building experience, just pick up a secular history book describing the time from Persia through first century Rome. You will see the hand of God working on every page. Here's an example from the book *Rome and Her Enemies*:

Lying at its heart is a mystery as profound as any in the records of human civilization. How on earth did the Romans do it? How did a single city, one that began as a small community of castle-rustlers, camped out among marshes and hills, end up ruling an empire that stretched from the moors of Scotland to the deserts of Iraq?

How on earth, he asks? Those events were not caused by anyone on earth. God caused them to happen, and Daniel and Zechariah both

prophesied about them in detail 500 years before the Roman Empire began. Jesus came at the right time (Romans 5:6), and that right time was the perfect time determined by God and planned by God.

We have one final question about these verses: why do we see the present tense in verse 8? “But God **shows** [present tense] his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ **died** [past tense] for us.” Why didn’t Paul say instead that God **showed** his love for us when Christ died? Why the present tense “shows” instead?

I think the answer to that question confirms everything we said about verse 5. You will recall that we said the love being poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit in verse 5 is the word of God being poured into our hearts through our ears. As Paul will tell us later, faith cometh by hearing.

But how does that fact about verse 5 explain the present tense in verse 8? Simple. God shows (present tense) his love for us when we read (present tense) his word about the death of Christ (a past event).

Yes, Jesus died for us twenty centuries ago, but God shows me that event today when I read about it in his Word. And that is just what we said earlier about verse 5 — God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. If something has been poured into my heart, that pouring must have happened during my lifetime rather than something that happened before I was born.

Romans 5:9

Romans 5:9 — Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

In verse 9, Paul reminds us of what he just told us, and then he uses what he told us earlier as a springboard to tell us something else — something he describes as “much more.” But what could possibly be “much more” than being justified by the blood of Christ? What is Paul saying here in verse 9?

To answer that question, let’s look first at what Paul just told us in the prior verses. He just told us that Jesus shed his blood for us while we were weak (verse 6), while we were ungodly (verse 6), and while we were sinners (verse 8). And in the next verse Paul will add enemies to that list — Jesus died for us while we were his enemies.

That was our state when we were justified by his blood — we were weak, we were sinners, we were ungodly, and we were Christ’s enemies. And yet, even though we were all of those things, Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins.

And remember verse 5 — Paul is telling us these things to show us how God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. As we said, that love enters our hearts through our ears as we hear about the wonderful things God has done for us.

And so now, having obeyed the gospel of Christ, what is our state?

- Are we still sinners? Not at all. Yes, we still sin, but the blood of Christ cleanses us from that sin (1 John 1:7). We have died to sin (Romans 6:2). Sin does not have dominion over us (Romans

6:14). We have been set free from sin (Romans 6:18). We have a very different relation to sin than we had before we obeyed the gospel.

- Are we still weak? Not at all. We are “strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might” (Ephesians 6:10). We are wearing the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:11). We are “strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:1).
- Are we still enemies of Christ? Not at all. Instead, having done what Jesus commands, we are his friends (John 15:14). We are no longer enemies of the cross of Christ, but instead our citizenship is now in heaven (Philippians 3:18-20). We are no longer a friend of the world and an enemy of God (James 4:4).

And so how can we describe our current state after our obedience to the gospel of Christ and while we are continuing on our lifelong walk of faith? I think John gives us the best description.

1 John 3:1-2 — See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” And so we are! How wonderful is that! And that is a far cry from what we once were — enemies of Christ. Now we are the children of God.

And I think we have found the answer to our question — what could be “much more” than our justification by the blood of Christ in verse 9? Let’s read that verse again:

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

The key to understanding that verse is to look at our own condition. What were we like when Jesus shed his blood for us? What will we be like when we are saved from the wrath of God? The answer is that we will be completely different! In fact, we are completely different now — and if we remain faithful, we will also be completely different then — either when we die and go to meet Jesus or when Jesus comes to get us on the last day.

We were the enemies of God when Jesus died for us, but we are the children of God when Jesus will save us from the wrath of God!

And, yes, verse 9 says “shall we be saved.” That is pointing (at least in part) to the final day of judgment when the sheep will be separated from the goats. (It may also be pointing to our own death, but even then it also includes the day of judgment). Paul has already told us about the coming wrath.

Romans 2:5 — But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.

“The wrath of God is coming” (Colossians 3:6). But Jesus “delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

1 Thessalonians 5:9 — For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our justification by the blood of Christ happened while we were his enemies, but our salvation from the wrath of God will happen while we are his friends! Paul's point here is simple — if God did the first thing, then we know God will do the second thing! If Jesus died for us while we were his enemies, we know **much more** that he will save us from the wrath of God while we are his friends!

That point is so important that Paul says it again in the next verse, but he adds a very important word — reconciled.