

Romans (23): God's Love for His People

Introduction:

In the passage that is before us today, Romans 5:6-11, we have rehearsed before us the great love that God has and has shown toward His people. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, there is much in the passage of Romans 5 to encourage you and cause you to rejoice in all that God has done and has promised to do for you. If you are not presently a believer in Jesus Christ, there is much here to persuade you to place your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. The present basis of hope and assurance is great for the believer and the future certain prospect for believers is glorious.

Let us read the first paragraph of Romans 5, which includes verses 1 through 5.

¹Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

The apostle had declared that we believers in Jesus Christ have great encouragement, for our "hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). It was Jesus Christ Himself who poured His Holy Spirit into our hearts. He had first done so for His people on the Day of Pentecost. As the risen and enthroned King, the Lord Jesus gave gifts to the subjects of His kingdom; He gave to them the Holy Spirit. With the baptizing of His church in the Holy Spirit, His people were baptized into the love of God. The love of God was poured into their hearts. This is why every true Christian is characterized by the love of God. This gift of the Holy Spirit shows itself in love shed into the heart.

This love of God experienced by His people is both subjective and objective in nature. It is *objective* in that *the true believer loves God with all his heart*. "But if anyone loves God, he is known by God" (1 Cor. 8:3). This objective love of God is shown in embracing Jesus Christ as God's Son. To love God is shown in love His Son. Jesus said to some who claimed to love God,

³⁹You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me, ⁴⁰yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life. ⁴¹I do not receive glory from people. ⁴²But *I know that you do not have the love of God within you*. ⁴³I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. (John 5:39-43)

But there is a *subjective* love that God gives to His people also, this is their personal awareness and confidence that *they are loved by God*. The Christians at Rome knew that they were loved by God. **Romans 1:7** reads, "To all those in Rome *who are loved by God* and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. The Christians in the church at Thessalonica also knew that they were loved by God.

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. ²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, *brothers loved by God*, that he has chosen you, ⁵because

our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. (1 Thess 1:1-4)

But one might respond: “But is not everyone loved by God equally? After all, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” But the Bible shows that although God is generally loving toward all people indiscriminately, God has love for His people that He does not have for those who are not His people. Many people do not recognize or understand this special love that God has for His people. What often happens, therefore, is that the love of God is misrepresented before the world.

Wrong understanding about the love of God leads to false assumptions and wrong conclusions about the nature of God and His will. Some suggest that because God is love, that He is easy to appease with respect to sin. Their weak and shallow concept of divine love results in them justifying sinful behavior in themselves and others. A wrong view of the love of God frequently results in the error of sinful license. But when we consider the nature of God’s love toward His people as it is in fact presented in Scripture, we will see that it leads to holy living, not loose living.

The Bible pronounces and illustrates throughout its pages that our God is a loving God. Perhaps the clearest statement of this truth is a verse in the little epistle of 1 John, which reads, “And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love; and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16). This is a truth that rings clear and true, and acknowledged by all who call themselves Christians.

And yet, though the truth is commonly held and commonly affirmed, it is a subject that is commonly misunderstood. **John MacArthur** wrote, “Love is the best known but least understood of all of God’s attributes.”¹ False assumptions are held; false assertions are made about God’s love. **J. I. Packer** described it this way.

St. John’s twice-repeated statement, “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16), is one of the most tremendous utterances of the Bible--and also one of the most misunderstood. False ideas have grown up round it like a hedge of thorns, hiding its real meaning from view, and it is no small task cutting through this tangle of mental undergrowth.²

Sadly, many take the thought that God is love, but they have wrong assumptions about the nature of that love, and therefore they have false thoughts, unbiblical thoughts, about the nature of God and His ways among the peoples of the earth. The Bible states that God is love, but the Bible also defines what that love is like. “Scripture does not merely say ‘God is love’ and leave it to the individual to interpret subjectively what that means.”³ Many, however, have done this. They suggest that because God is love, that He is easy to mollify toward sin and sinners. He does not look upon sin as a great evil to be punished with His eternal wrath, but merely as an unfortunate malady that needs healing. They then take their shallow, skewed concept of divine love and apply it as a means to justify their behavior and to form and shape a “christianity” that suits them.

They envision God as a benign heavenly grandfather--tolerant, affable, lenient, permissive, devoid of any real displeasure over sin, who without consideration of His holiness will benignly pass over sin and accept people as they are.⁴

For example, if they are to excuse in themselves and in others what the Scriptures condemns, if they are to eradicate from their belief system those teachings that are offensive to their sensibilities, then they simply use love, as they have redefined it, as an overarching principle by which to judge the Scriptures. They say that since God is love, that nothing else matters, such as doctrine, sound theology. **D. Martin Lloyd-Jones** wrote,

¹ John MacArthur, *The Love of God* (Word Publishing, 1996), p.1.

² James I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Intervarsity Press, 1973), p. 106.

³ MacArthur, *The Love of God*, p. 35

⁴ John MacArthur, *The Love of God*.

The great tendency in this present century has been to put as an antithesis the idea of God as a God of love on the one side, and theology or dogma on the other. Now the average person has generally taken up such a position as follows, "You know, I am not interested in your doctrine. Surely the great mistake of the church has been made throughout the centuries is all this talk about dogma, all this doctrine about sin, and the doctrine of the atonement, and this idea of justification and sanctification. Of course there are some people who may be interested in that kind of thing; they may enjoy reading and arguing about it, but as for myself," says the man, "there does not seem to be any truth in it; all I say is that God is love." So he puts up this idea of God as love over against all these doctrines, which the church has taught throughout the centuries.⁵

Lloyd-Jones went on to assert that these people who set the love of God against these other teachings reveal themselves to "know nothing whatsoever about the love of God." Ultimately the love of God cannot be understood apart from the issues surrounding God's action in bringing sinners into a relationship with Himself through Jesus Christ.

God reveals quite clearly and quite frequently in His Word that He has a *special love* for His people that is unique and special, a special love for them that He does not have for the world. We read that Christ loves His church, and gave Himself for it. John 13:1, "Then Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end." And yet, we would affirm that He shows a *general love* to all people without distinction. How should we understand this distinction?

1. God's general love for mankind

Let us affirm some teachings in God's Word regarding His love. *First, God's general love extends to all people in all places.* God loves all that He has created. When God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, He pronounced them good. Genesis 1:31, "And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." God was well pleased with His creation and delighted in it. He is said to "rejoice over all His works" (Psa. 104:31).

God delights particularly in the intelligent creatures He made, both angels and people. They are objects of His attention, concern, protection and provision. God has a general love to all men, because they are *His* creatures, *His* offspring, and the work of *His* hands. We read of God's concern for them in Acts 17:28, "For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, 'For we are also his offspring.'"

God is loving not just to His people, but is loving to *all* people. Jesus taught His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount that they are to love their enemies:

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matt. 5:44f)

We are to love our enemies because we are to be like our Father who loves His enemies.

God's general love for sinners is seen in that *He is gracious to sinners.* There is nothing in fallen man that moves God to extend His grace to them. Sin has rendered mankind itself odious before a holy God. Here is a common error: many assume that God loves sinners because there is something lovely that elicits His affection for them. God is gracious toward fallen man because God is loving, not because fallen man is loveable. The very nature of grace suggests that His favor is extended apart from merit. When we read of how sin is depicted in the Scriptures before a holy God, then this false notion will dissipate. The Bible reveals that it is an amazing wonder for God to be gracious to sinners.

⁵ MacArthur, *The Love of God*, p. 36.

God's general love for sinners is seen in that *He is merciful to sinners*. There is nothing in fallen man that warrants God to extend mercy to him. By its very nature, mercy is undeserved. Mercy cannot be demanded; it must be freely bestowed. Mercy is God not giving people what they deserve. Sinners deserve God's eternal displeasure and punishment. That He grants them time and opportunity to repent, is great mercy, totally undeserved by them. It is due solely to the love of God that He does not immediately bring history to a close and pour out His wrath upon this world.

God's general love for sinners is seen in that *He is slow to anger*. God's love for sinners is manifest in His patience toward them. We see God's patience displayed in our Lord Jesus' words pronounced over rebellious Jerusalem.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those that are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matt. 23:37-47)

Several points may be made with respect to this passage. *First*, although these people were guilty sinners deserving of God's wrath, *God desired their well being*. He continually sent messengers to them calling them informing them of their sin and calling upon them to turn back to God. *Second*, God had been *slow to anger* with respect to them. The sins mentioned by our Lord were committed over the course of centuries. *Third*, God's patience with them did not lessen their punishment, but rather *their lack of response to God's patient dealing with them compounded their guilt, aggravating their condemnation*. God does not immediately pour out His wrath upon sinners because He is patient toward them. *Fourth*, but God's love is seen even toward them, in that *He continually desired their repentance from sin and turning back to Him right to the end*.

God's general love for sinners is seen in that *He is abundant in lovingkindness*. God is good even to His enemies. He deals with them in patience. He gives them space to repent. Even of the evil Amorites, God held off displacing them by the Israelites for their iniquity was not yet full (cf. Gen. 15:16).

God's general love for sinners is God is seen in that *He relents from doing harm*. We read in the Scriptures that God does not take pleasure in pouring out His wrath upon sinners. He makes no apology for it. He is right in doing so, but He does not delight in doing so. To rebellious Israel, God declared:

Say unto them, "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?" (Eze. 33:11)

The supreme manifestation of God's general love toward sinners is in that *He gave His Son to die, so that sinners might be saved*. We read of this, of course, throughout Scripture, but perhaps most clearly in John 3:16, 17.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

Here we see the full love of God toward sinners manifested. We see in His giving of His Son that indeed He is a *gracious and merciful* God, *slow to anger* and *abundant in lovingkindness*, One *who relents from doing harm*. That He would make a way of escape for guilty sinners through bearing God's wrath due them, is love in action.

What may we say regarding God's general loving action toward fallen mankind? **First, the nature of God's general love gives hope to poor, needy, repentant sinners**. Sinners may take heart in that God will receive them for Christ's sake. Although they are deserving of His wrath, He freely offers pardon and peace to them through Christ.

Second, the nature of God's general love aggravates the condemnation of unbelievers. Most people in our land know and, I would venture to say, even believe John 3:16. They falsely assume, however, that this lessens their responsibility and culpability before God. The gospel of Jesus Christ is only good news to believing sinners. John 3:16 will be the basis of God's greatest condemnation of sinners on the day of judgment. To know the love of God in Christ but not to respond to it, aggravates to unimaginable proportions the guilt of sinners.

Our Lord responded to unbelievers who heard Him personally and yet did not believe on Him. We read in Matthew 11:20ff:

Then began He (Jesus) to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not: "Woe unto thee, Chorazin! Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.

So we read of the great condemnation of those who hear of the way of salvation through Christ and yet refuse to believe: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36).

Third, the nature of the general love of God for sinners is insufficient to save sinners. All of what we have set forward today about the love of God deals with externals only. All of what we have said has been a description of what God does *toward* man, but unless God does something *in* fallen man and *for him*, it will avail nothing; he will perish in his sin. ***For the general love of God for sinners that make available salvation for anyone, secures salvation for no one. Only those who are then objects of His special, covenant love are the objects of His saving grace.*** Immediately following the pronouncement of judgment on Chorazin and Bethsaida, Jesus uttered this prayer to His Father:

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight.

2. God's special love for His chosen people

God reveals quite clearly and quite frequently in His Word that He has a love for His people that is unique and special, a special love for them that He does not have for the world. We read that Christ loves His church, and gave Himself for it (Cf Eph. 5:25). We read of His special love for His people in John 13:1, "Then Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, ***having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.***" Here we see that our Lord "loved His own." It was His special love for them that moved Him to live in this world and to face the hour of His death, knowing that through His death He would secure their salvation.

Now, the love of God that we find most frequently in Paul's epistle to the Romans, is this special, covenantal love that God has for His chosen people. It is this love that is reflected in the passage before us, **Romans 5:6-11**. And so, we now arrive to the second paragraph of this section of Paul's epistle. Let us read verses 6 through 11.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die-- ⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall

we be saved by his life. ¹¹More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

I. God's love for His people (Rom. 5:6-11)

We first read that God showed His love toward us, that is, believers (i.e. the elect), in that Christ died for us, the ungodly. **Verse 6** reads, ***“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”*** Paul opens this paragraph with the word, “for.” In verse 5 Paul described the love that God has for His people. He had declared, “and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” Verse 6 explains for us how that love of God has been manifested toward us: ***“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”***

Paul’s use of the word “weak” is a literary device.⁶ By this word Paul lessens the matter in order to increase the importance of the idea to his reader. We know that we are sinners, if we are without Christ dying on our behalf, we are not simply “weak”, but we are totally hopeless and helpless, even spiritually dead in our condemned condition.

He declares that “at the right time” Christ died. This means that Christ died at the appointed time of God. It was also the proper time. It had to have been then and there. “The time of man’s extremity was the time for God’s efficacious work in the accomplishments wrought by the Son of God.” Paul may have been alluding to what he had declared in Galatians 4:4f, “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.”

At the right time Christ died for the “ungodly.” Here is the wonder of God’s love. It was manifested to us in our ungodly state. God’s love toward us was not because He saw us as people of worth or value, that there was something about us that would bring some benefit to God Himself, for we were ungodly. There was nothing about us that would have been compatible with Him or desirous to Him. It was not manifest because of who He would fashion us and make of us. His love was manifest to us, ungodly ones.

Verses 7 and 8 underscore the remarkable nature of God’s love toward His people. ***“For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die--⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** What Christ has done for us is unheard of. Paul makes a concession that there may be an occasion when someone will lay down his life for another, but that would only be if the one sacrificing his life for another could see some good or virtue in the one being rescued.

“It is on this background of concession that the complete contrast between the human and the divine appears... In the human sphere scarcely for a *righteous* and *good* man will one die but God exhibits and commends *His* love in that it was for *sinners* Christ died.”⁷

Matthew Henry describes the love of God shown to us.

But Christ died for sinners (v. 8), neither righteous nor good; not only such as were useless, but such as were guilty and obnoxious; not only such as there would be no loss of should they perish, but such whose destruction would greatly redound to the glory of God's justice, being malefactors and criminals that ought to die... Now herein *God commended his love*, not only proved or evidenced his love (he might have done that at a cheaper rate), but magnified it and made it illustrious. This circumstance did greatly magnify and advance his love, not only put it past dispute, but rendered it the object of the greatest wonder and admiration: “Now my creatures shall see that I love them, I will give them such an instance of it as shall be without parallel.”⁸

⁶ It is called “tapeinosis”, or “demeaming.” E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech* (Baker Book House, orig. 1898), p. 160.

⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 168.

⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 5, p. 696.

Paul next encourages his readers that they can anticipate the great blessing of God upon them now that God has justified them through faith in Jesus Christ. **Verse 9** records, “*Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.*” Interestingly, this is the first occasion where the word “saved” is used in this epistle. Salvation has many names in the Word of God other than that of being “saved.” Here Paul builds upon his assertion that they had been justified from their sin in the *past*. He shows that they will be saved from God’s wrath upon sinners in the *future*. Here we see the blessings of salvation being experienced in time. We have been forgiven; we will yet be delivered from God’s punishment on sinners; we have been saved, but also we will one day be saved. Because of the certainty of first having been justified through faith alone, we have certainty that we will escape God’s wrath on the Day of Judgment. “If God has already justified us on the basis of Jesus’ atoning death, if He has already pronounced the verdict, any verdict rendered at the final judgment will be only a confirming formality.”⁹

Paul had affirmed this truth elsewhere. To the church at Thessalonica Paul wrote,

For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.* (1 Thess. 1:9f)¹⁰

Verse 10 states the same truth in other words. “*For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.*”

The death of the Son of God on behalf of His people appeases God’s wrath toward them that had formerly existed between them. We are reconciled to one another.

Paul has used a number of terms to describe people’s state before God prior to their justification through faith. We were “weak”, in other words, “powerless” (v. 6). We were “ungodly” in that we were opposed to God’s holy nature and ways (v. 6). We were “sinners”, describing our continuous rebellion and infractions against God’s law and His rule over us (v. 8). And fourthly, here in verse 10, we were “enemies.” Although people who do not know Jesus Christ would not readily admit to the charge, God’s Word teaches that man in his natural state is a God-hater. If he could, he would destroy God, removing Him and His influence from His world. “We think of God’s law as suffocatingly oppressive and destructive of who we want to be. So we are set on destroying God or at least destroying His influence so far as the living of our lives is concerned.”¹¹

We who believe the gospel of God’s Son are presently reconciled to God. To reconcile someone is to transform a heated and hostile relationship into one of friendship. Paul declares that if God were willing and able to “reconcile” us to Himself while we were yet guilty and hostile sinners, how much more should we see Him as willing to exonerate us from the guilt of sin on the Day of Judgment!

But Paul argues for more than that. We may now not only not worry about our future standing before God’s judgment, we have every right to rejoice in the certainty of our future deliverance from His wrath, greatly enjoying now the fruit of our reconciled relationship with our God. **Verse 11** reads, “*More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*”

II. Several implications of our passage

1. We see once again that as Christians, we are to believing with our eyes set on eternity, the things of the coming world, not this world.

2. We should always be living in the light of the final judgment of mankind when we will all give an account of our lives before God. But we should not be looking toward that Day in fear or doubt, but in confident rejoicing that we stand and will stand in Jesus Christ. Paul set forth the truth that every true Christian has the grounds to be presently “rejoicing” in the certainty of his exoneration on the Day of Judgment. Some true

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans, vol. 2, The Reign of Grace* (Baker Books, 1992), p. 546.

¹⁰ Classic dispensationalists teach that this is a promise for the church to escape a future tribulation period, which they say is “the wrath to come” that Paul wrote about here. No, the wrath of God mentioned here references the future pouring out of God’s His vengeance and just punishment upon guilty sinners upon His sentence of them on the final Day of Judgment.

¹¹ Boice, *Romans*, vol. 2, p. 546.

believers, sadly, fail to see this reality. They see their sin clearly; they do not see their reconciliation with God as clearly; therefore, they fail to rejoice in their relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

But perhaps we should say, “should mark” the reaction of the believer—for although Paul states our boasting as a fact, he undoubtedly wants to encourage any who are faltering or downhearted to contemplate again what he or she has in Christ—a new relationship with God (“justification,” “peace with God,” “reconciliation”) that overcomes all present adversity (“rejoicing in afflictions”) and that provides absolute security for the life to come (“rejoicing in the glory of God,” “hope does not disappoint us,” “saved from wrath”). And such contemplation can lead only to rejoicing. So Chrysostom¹²: “And so the fact of his saving us, and saving us too when we were in such a plight, and doing it by means of the only-begotten, and not merely by his only-begotten, but by his blood, weaves for us endless crowns to glory in.”¹³

3. Be aware always of the eternal and unchanging nature of God’s love for You which is in Jesus Christ.

4. Always be mindful of our utter weakness to bring anything forward to change or shape our relationship with God. We were “weak”, in that we were without strength, without ability, to amend ourselves, improve our condition, approach God, commend ourselves to God.

[See Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 5 (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008) pp. 278f.]

¹² John Chrysostom lived in the approximate years, 347-407. He was the Archbishop of Constantinople. He is known for his eloquence in preaching, as well as his denouncement of abusive authority both in the church and the political arenas. After his death he was given the name in Greek, *chrysostomos*, which means “golden mouthed.” In English it is translated to Chrysostom.

¹³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (William B. Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 314f.