

Sermons through

Romans

Dying For Sinners

Romans 5:6-8

With Study Questions

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For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-8).

Introduction

There may not be a more ancient debate than the one revolving around man's role in his own redemption. One wonders whether or not the animals sought to distance themselves from Adam and Eve as they, perhaps, bickered over the effectiveness of fig leaves to hide their shame (Genesis 3:7). Were there any critical thinkers during the construction of the Tower of Babel who rolled their eyes at the prospect of building a structure to heaven (Genesis 11:4)?

Disagreement continued through the early church, most notably in the fourth and fifth centuries between Augustine and Pelagius. Pelagius didn't embrace the notion of original sin. He was a strong believer in man's natural ability to choose good over evil, the only grace needed was access to the law. His position was in stark contrast, not only to Augustine's understanding of human nature, but the entire church at the Council of Carthage declared him a heretic.

Shortly after Pelagianism was declared heretical, semipelagianism surfaced in the fifth and sixth centuries. According to semipelagianism, original sin does exist, but it has not so affected human nature as to restrict man's ability to make "the first move" toward God. Although the view was also labeled heretical at the Second Council of Orange in 529, variations of it wafted through the church until the Reformation where the debate was reignited by Luther, Calvin, Arminius and their followers.

Forms of semipelagianism still play a dominant role in contemporary Christian thought. It is safe to say that the vast majority of evangelists over the past two hundred years have presented the gospel with a semipelagian theme – the gospel offered as a choice for men while God remains

somewhat inactive. I write “somewhat inactive” because many evangelists will agree that the Holy Spirit will play some role in prompting a response, but it is ultimately left to the man or woman. God, it has been said, is a gentleman who will not force His way into our lives.

This semipelagian view is popular because it seems to accurately reflect our experience. We are volitional creatures who make choices; every single day every human being chooses to either believe or not believe that there a God in heaven who sent His Son to die for sinners. Semipelagianism is also attractive because, at least at a surface level, it explains human culpability. If the choice is, in the final analysis, left with me, then it makes sense that I am responsible for it.

I say “surface level” because we often ignore the independent, antecedent cause for making the right choice. Why is it some people choose poorly and others wisely? A variety of answers are given: parents, culture, environment, influences, intellect, etc. Of course this just begs the question, from where or whom are we given parents, culture, environment and so forth? What is the first cause of these things...of anything?

So even though semipelagianism seems to explain my experience, deeper reflection reveals that it falls short. Add to that that as Christians, we should not arrive at theological conclusions via our limited perceptions of our experience, we should rather evaluate our experiences via the spectacles of Scripture. My experience tells me that I have chosen to believe in Jesus; the Bible tells me why I have made that choice.

That God is the first cause of creation – creation ex nihilo--is of little debate among Christians. But there is perhaps nothing greater for a Christian to know than whom or what is the first cause of their redemption and the basis for it. The knowledge of this becomes our starting blocks for our worship of God and our love for our neighbor. This is not to be thought of as a cold, academic, theological endeavor. This is God wrapping us up in the warm blanket of His love, whispering His wisdom in our ears and sending us out with fresh resolve as to who we are and how we are to live.

What we will see in our study of these verses is how they speak to, at least, the following:

- Our worship of God
- Our humility before God
- Our humility before others

- Our assurance before God
- Our forgiveness of others
- Our love of God
- Our love of others

For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6)

Without Strength

The “for” at the beginning of this verse attaches it to verse 5 where we are told of the love of God “**poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.**” “**Due time**” was that unique time in history when Christ died.

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons (Galatians 4:4).

When it comes to redemption, salvation, eternal life and peace with God we are not to look to some future event or a variety of past events. We look to a single event that happened at the perfect time. Those before Christ looked forward to that event via God’s promise and those after look at the promise fulfilled. Our temptation to look to the events of the past, our expectations of the future or even our own pious pursuits as a source of redemption is to look away from our only hope.

In this verse we see two attributes shared by all humanity when it comes to a relationship with God; the attributes of weakness and ungodliness. “**Without strength**” *asthenon* means just that – having no strength. I recall my old friend Bob Wieland who lost his legs in an explosion in Viet Nam. He had been a great athlete but after the injury he said he could barely lift his arms. In time he lifted small weights, then heavy weights, then became a national champion. Mankind can expect no such progress through his own efforts in reaching heaven. Without strength doesn’t mean, as with a Pelagian or semipelagian, a little strength, but incapacitation as so many cross references can easily show. Elsewhere Paul describes the condition:

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1).

Ungodly

But Paul doesn't stop at the mere incapacitated state, as if we desire something which we are incapable of reaching. Christianity is often presented with the difficulty of the fictional scenario of the far off person who has not yet heard of Christ having no provision for his desire to be right with God. But if the totality of Scripture is used to address that scenario, no difficulty exists for that person doesn't exist.

We all fall into the category of not merely being weak, but being "**ungodly**". The ungodly *asebes* person may be a good neighbor or a trustworthy friend. They may stand up for moral values work hard in their contributions to society. But the virtues (that is, their very definition of virtue) of the ungodly can change in a moment's notice because they are not attached to anything eternal or absolute. The signature characteristic of the ungodly is that they live in this world as if there is no God. And because all men know that there is a God, this means they live in opposition to what they know to be true.

In one respect we know there are no atheists for all men know that God is (Romans 1:19-21), but in another respect all men are born atheists in actively oppose what the fear of God demands – generally characterized by immoral and impious behavior.

My atheist friends like to point out all the blood shed throughout history in the name of religion. I have often pointed out the tens of millions of innocent citizens killed in the twentieth century via atheist dictators. They will then point out that atheism isn't a life and world view; it is merely the lack of believing in a god. Even if that argument were granted (which I don't) the conviction that one does not acknowledge an absolute and transcendent source of ethics leaves a vacuum only to be filled by human visions and desires with no restraints – hence the bloodshed.

That being said, man is "**without**" the "**strength**" spiritually, physically, morally or in any other way to reach God. But beyond that, there is no desire on the part of natural man to seek after God and,

therefore true goodness. We are estranged from God whilst still in the “womb” and “go astray from birth, speaking lies” (Psalm 58:3). All men are “born to trouble as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). We offer no signs of genuine redemption; we make no initial move toward God or true goodness. As Thomas Schreiner aptly observes:

Christ did not die for sinners because he detected in them an inclination toward God or (v. 10) a desire to end the enmity toward him. He died to overcome the enmity and hostility of the ungodly toward God.¹

We are like the beasts in *Aliens* who offered nothing but death and destruction, that just need to be nuked from outer space. But instead of sending nukes from outer space, the Father sent His own Son from heaven. In Christ we can be called godly and it is in His strength that we find deliverance. Scripture offers no short list of those who, by faith, were made strong out of weakness:

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness (Hebrews 11:32-34).

But let us not miss Paul’s point, which is the undeserved sacrifice of Christ.

For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die (Romans 5:7).

For Whom Would You Die?

Jesus taught:

¹ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (260). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

But this seems to stretch significantly beyond this great love. The point of this verse seems very simple. History can provide many examples of heroes sacrificing their lives for others. A “**righteous**” man or a “**good**” man can be understood as just man or a kind man.

The form of the statement would even allow a translation of not merely a good man but a good cause. A person may give their life for someone or something they believe worthy of the effort. But it extends beyond human reason that a man would lay down his life for that which he believed to be unjust, evil, or bad.

It might be said that it is Jesus’ laying down His life that actually makes the person His friend. Jesus is not laying down His life for a righteous person asking for help. He lays down His life for those who would otherwise profane the name of His heavenly Father and curse and kill Him. Paul now restates verse six, making it personal:

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

A Demonstration

William Hendriksen points out:

The word “demonstrates,” (is) *present* tense. Although it is true that for Paul, at the time he wrote this letter, as well as for us today, the death of Christ was an event that had occurred in the past, its lesson remains an ever *present* and glorious reality.²

This is the great demonstration of God’s love toward us--that while we were in a state of utter rebellion (over and against both the Pelagian and semipelagian views) Christ died for us, thus granting us peace with God and the riches and glory of heaven. I had mentioned earlier how this,

² Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953-2001). *Vol. 12-13: Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. New Testament Commentary (173). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

among other things, affects our worship of God, our humility before God, our humility before others, our assurance before God, our forgiveness of others, our love of God and our love of others. I can only brief touch on these things but it won't be difficult to ascertain how far this reaches.

Worship

It affects our worship of God because it brings to light the depth of our sin and the height of His grace. It should be our prayer that we, along with Paul, would begin to grasp our naturally wretched condition that we, along with Paul would move from that realization of wretchedness to praise and exaltation:

O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 7:24, 25)!

Humility

The passages places a finger of light upon our humility before God and others when we recognize that if left to our own devices, our nature would bring us only to a place of utter shame and contempt. It is our reasonable service to bow before God and count others as more significant than ourselves. It was with his eye to the cross that Paul wrote:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:3, 4).

How much deeper must we be driven in that humility when we understood our nature when Christ died for us?

Assurance

A passage like the one before speaks deeply to our assurance. God chose to love us while in a state of utter rebellion. He loved us when there

was nothing about us that would attract Him to us. The Apostle John explains this love:

In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:9-10).

In the passage, our love for God is downplayed in light of His love for us. In 1 John 4:19 John will explain that “**we love because he first loved us**” demonstrating that His first love is not merely chronological but causal; His love for us is what creates our love for Him. In the very next chapter John will seek to instill a sense of confidence and assurance in his readers:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

If we are to have full assurance (to know with confidence that we belong to Him), we must recognize that God chose to love us while in a state of stark and unvarnished rebellion. If he loved us only because we love him, it would be easy for us to conclude that it would only last as long as we loved him. But since we love Him because He loved us (His loving being eternal) it assures us that our love for Him will last.

Forgiveness

And how does this speak to our forgiving of others. God did wait for us to come to our senses before He forgave us. But He actively and effectively brought us to repentance (2 Timothy 2:25), then forgave us.

Love

It is not difficult to extract from these principles how such love for us would affect our love for God and others. Jesus said it simply this way:

“He who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47). The more we grasp the depth of our sin and forgiveness, the greater our capacity to love others. Having spoken of the love of God in sending His Son to die, John continues the thought.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 9:11).

God’s love for us was a sacrificial love for that which was not worthy of love. This is the heart of our faith. The great demonstration of God’s love is that He loves sinners.

Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose there is such great debate revolving around man's role in his own redemption (pages 2, 3)?
2. Define Pelagianism. Define semipelagianism. How common are these views in today's church? Why do you think there are attractive (pages 2, 3)?
3. How much moral or spiritual strength do people have when it comes to their relationship with God (page 4)?
4. Define ungodly. Why is ungodliness such a volatile attribute (pages 5, 6)?
5. How did God respond to our naturally hostile condition (page 6)?
6. What condition were we in when Christ died for us? How does this affect our worship, humility, assurance, forgiveness, love, etc. (pages 6-9)?