

Romans 5:6-11

⁶For at the appointed time, while we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷It is rare indeed that someone will die for a righteous person. Perhaps someone might actually go so far as to die for a person who has been good to him. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹Therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, it is even more certain that we will be saved from God's wrath through him. ¹⁰For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, it is even more certain that, since we have been reconciled, we will be saved by his life. ¹¹And not only is this so, but we also go on rejoicing confidently in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received this reconciliation.

While We Were Still Sinners...

I.

It is rare indeed. Our nation's highest award for valor in combat is the Medal of Honor. The first was issued in 1861. Millions of men and women have marched in the ranks of soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and coast guard personnel. Yet only 3,400 Medals of Honor have been awarded.

Service members are among those who would consider others worth saving, even at the cost of their own lives. The stories of Medal of Honor recipients are often grizzly and gruesome. Many—maybe even *most*—of those who receive the award do so posthumously, because they die in their efforts to save others.

Firefighters and other rescuers often have the same attitude. While others mill around aimlessly in a state of shock at the events of the moment, or rush *out* of the danger zone to save themselves, firefighters and rescuers rush *in* to danger to work to save others.

Paul writes: "It is rare indeed that someone will die for a righteous person. Perhaps someone might actually go so far as to die for a person who has been good to him" (Romans 5:7, EHV). Perhaps Paul was thinking of soldiers and rescue workers. They put their lives on the line for people they consider righteous—people they consider worthy of saving.

II.

One thing those who have been rescued by firefighters or Medal of Honor recipients have in common is that they were helpless. They couldn't save themselves. That is something that Paul says of all of us as he begins this text: "At the appointed time, while we were still helpless..." (Romans 5:6, EHV).

But then he piles up some pretty unflattering terms; some pretty derogatory terms. He identifies: "The ungodly" (Romans 5:6, EHV), "Sinners" (Romans 5:8, EHV), and "Enemies" (Romans 5:10, EHV). That last one is pretty harsh. You won't find many Medal of Honor recipients who risked their lives saving the enemy.

"It is rare indeed that someone will die for a righteous person. Perhaps someone might actually go so far as to die for a person who has been good to him" (Romans 5:7, EHV). Paul stacks up all those other unflattering terms surrounding this passage about someone being willing to die for a good or righteous person to really cause us to take a careful look.

The Medal of Honor recipient or the firefighter might look at someone as "good enough" to be worthy of saving. The humane thing to do is to rescue a fellow human. But the word "righteous" means "free from guilt or sin."

Today's First Lesson joins the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai, just before Moses was to go up on the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. God's message for the people was: "Now if you will carefully listen to my voice and keep my covenant, then you will be my special treasure out of all the nations, although the entire earth is mine" (Exodus 19:5, EHV). You know the history of the people. Before Moses even carried down the tablets of stone inscribed with these Commandments, the people commissioned a Golden Calf to worship. The people could not even keep the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods beside me" (Exodus 20:3, EHV). Remember, righteous means to be "free from guilt or sin." They were *not* righteous.

You are not righteous. *I* am not righteous. Every one of us puts someone or something in first place above God from time to time. As Jesus explained the Ten Commandments in the New Testament, he showed that every one of them has to do not just with sinful actions, but sinful thoughts and words, as well. We fall far short of righteousness when we compare ourselves to any part of God's Moral Law.

People like to say: "God hates sin, but loves the sinner." The Bible says: "The arrogant cannot stand before your eyes. You hate all evildoers" (Psalm 5:5, EHV). God hates evildoers. Evildoers are sinners. In this lesson Paul identified us as sinners. He also called us ungodly. That stands to reason. Those who are sinners are ungodly, which means "denying or disobeying God." He called us "enemies." The sinful human nature is actively opposed to God. That's part of our heritage.

III.

The Bible contains paradoxes. God hates all evildoers, and we were all those things. We were "Ungodly" (Romans 5:6, EHV), "Sinners" (Romans 5:8, EHV), and "Enemies" (Romans 5:10, EHV) of God. Yet that is exactly when God showed his great love for us. "For at the appointed time, while we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly...⁸ But God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6, 8, EHV).

There was *nothing* about our sinful human condition to inspire God's love. Sticking to his righteous, holy nature, God should have displayed hate; we are evildoers, after all. But he didn't. God's *love* for us comes through, instead. I hope you don't get tired of me telling you about "agape" love. I never tire of speaking of God's "agape" love.

Agape is the Greek word for love that loves when love isn't deserved. The words of Paul that serve as today's Second Lesson describe in detail love that loves when love isn't deserved. We were sinners—ungodly enemies to him. Yet he displayed such great love for us that he didn't leave us that way.

"Therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, it is even more certain that we will be saved from God's wrath through him" (Romans 5:9, EHV).

When Moses received God's Law on Mt. Sinai, the Moral Law was only part of it. There was a Ceremonial Law. The Ceremonial Law told Israel how to worship. There were sacrifices to be made for violations of any of God's Laws. All of those sacrifices pointed ahead to the sacrifice which really mattered—the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away, or pays for, the sin of the world. It is Jesus' blood that allows us to be "justified." Justify is used in a legal sense. To be justified is to be declared righteous. Jesus' blood allows God to declare us righteous, despite the words Paul has used—despite the fact that we are ungodly sinners.

"For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, it is

even more certain that, since we have been reconciled, we will be saved by his life” (Romans 5:10, EHV). Our ungodly sin has been paid for in Jesus. That reconciled us to God—that restored our relationship with God. Jesus, the sacrificed Lamb of God, didn’t stay dead and in the grave. He is risen. He is risen, indeed. He lives. Relationship restored because of the work of Jesus, God has even more to give to us. He guarantees our salvation by Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. God will not withhold any blessing from us—his dear children who believe in what our Savior has done for us.

IV.

Those who have been rescued often want to say “Thank you” to their rescuer. Those who lived to tell the tales of valorous soldiers submitted their names to be considered for the Medal of Honor. Many who have been rescued from life-threatening situations by firefighters and other rescue personnel say their thanks by contributing to scholarship funds or memorial funds for their heroes.

“And not only is this so, but we also go on rejoicing confidently in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received this reconciliation” (Romans 5:11, EHV).

We say thank you, too. We give thanks for the greatest rescue mission ever embarked on. Jesus paid for our sins. We are fully and freely forgiven. No longer does God see us as enemies. No longer does he see us as arrogant evildoers who are incapable of standing in his presence.

We are dear children. We have been born again. We show that in our daily living. Branches Band was here to lead our worship a few weeks ago. They reminded us about the way they got their name: Jesus calling himself the vine, and speaking of those who believe in him and follow him as the branches. We are branches, grafted in to the Vine. Jesus fills us with the power of his forgiving love to be forgiving to those around us—showing love even to those who are unloving to us.

Perhaps you aren’t a firefighter who goes in to burning buildings when others are running out. But you *do* know the truth Paul teaches us here. You *do* know that Christ died for the ungodly sinners world-wide. You *do* know that those without the understanding of what Jesus has done are just as helpless as you once were. You *do* know that “while they were still sinners...Christ died for them. Perhaps *you* can serve as a rescuer under Jesus, the Great Rescuer—sharing the message of his forgiving love with others. Amen.