

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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**Sermon Title:** “While We Were Still Weak”

**Sermon Text:** Romans 5:6-8

**Rom. 5:6** For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

**Rom. 5:7** For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—

**Rom. 5:8** but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

**Main Point:** The amazing grace of God is seen in the unlikely, improbable, counterintuitive death of Christ for helpless sinners who were not admirable or worthy.

## **Outline:**

1. Our Weakness
2. God’s Love
3. Christ’s Death

## **Introduction**

We have focused a great deal on the gospel in this sermon series. And I have tried to say that the most important thing in the entire world is being restored to God. And in Christ, that is what we receive. When we trust in Jesus, we have fellowship with God, we are united with Christ, we’re indwelt by the Spirit and adopted into the Father’s household. These are tremendous gifts.

But if we are honest, among the many struggles of the Christian life is something we may not talk much about, which is that old temptation that is sometimes called the “fear of man.” We are afraid other people don’t like us. We are afraid that if people get to know us, they’ll reject us. Or we’re afraid to live out our faith and talk about it with others, because – again – we’re afraid of what people will think.

We fear man. We fear that people don’t like us, that people don’t want us around. And I think at times, even though we know the gospel, we may also be afraid that the same is true of God.

A part of us may think, “how could he love me? How could he be interested in me at all?” And we sort of talk ourselves into thinking that people hate us, and maybe even God hates us.

Now, part of the problem here is that we tend to base how we feel about ourselves on *US*. We make ourselves the basis of how God and others feel about us.

Paul here flips that tendency upside down. Right? We tend to feel better about ourselves the more we perform, the more we do. And we tend to think others will feel the same way: the more we work, the more useful we are, the more people will appreciate us.

Part of what is so world-flipping about the gospel is that God is so different from us. And we see this here today: God is telling us that He *doesn't* love us because we're useful, because we do something for him, because we provide some service to him, or because he gets something out of the deal. What is God saying here today? He's telling us that God loves us from his gratuitous generosity, not basing any of his love on us, on our deeds, on our productivity, or anything else.

Instead, the picture Paul is painting for us doesn't look great for us here on *one* level. Because in one sense Paul is like, “you are weak. You are helpless. You have nothing. You're broke. You've got nothing to contribute.”

And at the very same time even as he strips us of our bragging rights and pride, once he's done he says, “And God loves you.”

We're so merit-based, aren't we? Because we think, “This doesn't make sense. There has to be something about us.” This is how we think: we regard people based on their usefulness to us. We love useful people, people who can give us something, people who provide some benefit to us. And God says, “If I loved based on merit, I wouldn't love anyone other than myself. No, I love you *before* there is anything lovely in you. And because of that love, my son laid down his life for you.”

However improbable. However nonsensical it seems to us. However unreasonable it might be to our ears, God loves us. How does he love us? Paul's going to show it to us today with three points. Very simple points.

First is “our weakness.”

Second is “God's love.”

And third is “Christ's death.”

## **1. Our Weakness**

First, Paul begins with our weakness.

In verse 6 Paul says this: “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”

We want to rush immediately to Christ’s death, maybe. But to appreciate where Paul is going, we should first think about the *when* of Christ’s death. *When* does Paul say he died for the ungodly?

It’s not when we’re great (after all, an ungodly person is not great).

It’s not when we’re strong. (After all, Paul says something quite different.)

He says, it’s “while we were still weak.” That’s when he dies for the ungodly.

But the foundational need and occasion for God’s grace is not your strength, it’s your weakness.

I mentioned the fear of man earlier. Sometimes we fear seeing our reputation torn down in peoples’ eyes. It’s not good for that to happen, especially if what people are saying about you is not true. But it’s pretty wild to see just how open God is about where our value comes from. It doesn’t come from us. It’s a borrowed value. It’s a value that’s given to us, not a value that’s natural to us.

In fact, we do worry a lot about what other people think of us. But think of what God actually knows about you and me. People around us don’t really know what we think or what we’ve done. But God? He knows everything.

Charles Spurgeon once said this (maybe you’ve heard it before):

“Brother, if any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him; for you are worse than he thinks you to be. If he charges you falsely on some point, yet be satisfied; for if he knew you better, he might change the accusation, and you would gain nothing by the correction. If you have your moral portrait painted, and it is ugly, be satisfied; for it only needs a few blacker touches, and it would be still nearer the truth.”

My encouragement with this quote is to say, “Don’t *bother* protecting yourself. By all means defend yourself against *false* accusations, but isn’t it amazing to think: I cannot pull the wool over God’s eyes. He knows how weak I am. He knows my failures. He knows my sins. He knows everything. It’s all an open book before him. I can hide nothing from him.”

If you had a friend or neighbor who learned everything you’d ever done, I guarantee you, you’d hide and never want them to see your face again. Well God does know everything. Everything. Nothing hidden, and he loves you. Just incredible.

One of the most profound stories in all of the Bible is in the book of Hosea. The prophet Hosea’s marriage to Gomer gives us this vivid picture of our own condition before Christ. God

commanded Hosea to take a wife who would be unfaithful, and even after she left him for other lovers and sold herself into slavery, he went after her, purchased her back, and loved her still. Gomer did not make herself lovely; she did not improve her condition or become worthy of rescue. Instead, her helplessness and disgrace only magnified the mercy of Hosea's redeeming love. The story shows us Hosea's consistent pursuit of his wife even though she fails her husband and his love repeatedly. But he keeps rescuing her and bringing her back.

In the same way, Paul tells us that while we were still weak, while we were unlovely, while we were unclean, while we were unworthy in our sin, Christ died for us.

The cross is not God rewarding the admirable, but God rescuing the helpless, buying back those who had sold themselves, and showing love precisely where there was nothing lovable to find. God dresses us and makes us lovely in the gospel. He doesn't look for lovely people to pour out his kindness upon. It's the opposite, actually.

Now, I can't know for sure where you are at the moment, but there are two needs that I can imagine.

Some of us may be puffed up with pride. We may think of ourselves as quite the spiritual catch. I hope none of us thinks this, but deep down we might think: "Well God, you're pretty lucky to have me in the church. I'm a first draft church member." But you might think that way about yourself. In which case we need to see that we do have an inner Gomer within us. We do have this tendency to leave and be unfaithful. "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it/Prone to leave the God I love." Can we sing that and mean it? If we can't, then we need God to correct us: God does love us, but not because of something great or glorious within our hearts. In some ways, we really have this faithless attitude within us, and we need to be humbled in the sight of God to recognize it. Maybe that's what you need today.

In which case, Paul tells us, "You are weak, not strong." There's no room for pride. If you're proud, then listen to God: "You are weak."

But there may be a very different need that I'd like to address in our second point today.

## **2. God's Love**

Second, Paul moves to God's love.

You see, some of us – many of us, probably – may not need to be told that we are Gomer. For some of us, we may feel so low because of our sin that we need to hear another truth: "Yes, you are Gomer." We don't minimize that. "Yes, you are Gomer. But God is Hosea and he loves you. He loves you in your weakness. He takes you and he clothes you and washes you and takes you back, and he doesn't base his love on anything in you."

There is this quote from the Princeton theologian Geerhardus Vos that said, "The reason God will never stop loving you is that he never began." And this would almost seem to sweet to be true except for the fact that he was really just reflecting something God says about his love in Jeremiah 31:3: "I have loved you with an everlasting love." His love transcends time. It has no beginning point in time. It has no ending. It is as everlasting as he is. His love is unconditional and timeless. Meaning he never learns something that changes his mind. He is eternal, and he sat His love upon you in eternity, and he will never revoke it. "He loves you with an everlasting love."

Now, here is what is so important to know: the love of God is his self-giving goodness. It is his inclination to communicate himself and his own blessedness to creatures like you and me. The way Herman Bavinck put it is, "God's love is Himself in His relation to creatures."

So when God declares his love for sinners like you and me, he is saying, "I have eternally decided to give myself to you and to give you a share in my eternal happiness, not because of who you are, but because of who I am. I am the God who loves the loveless and the unlovable. My love starts with me, and flows to you. It does not flow from you at all. I love you because I have decided to."

The love comes first, and it is revealed, seen, and exposed by what Christ has done. God's love is objective, and prior to the other wonderful things he does for us.

It is not prompted or caused by anything in you. Right? It's not you or me that has some special something... something about us that no one else sees, but that God sees. In ourselves, there's nothing for God's grace to grab hold of and to say, "This. This is why I love him. This is why I love her."

No, God's love is mysterious and rooted in his will, not in something about us. Listen to 2 Timothy 1:9: "God saved us... not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began." Right? Paul says, "not because of our works, but because of his own purpose." You might say, "Why me?" God has his reasons, says Paul, but it's something about him and not something about you.

Here's another. Exodus 33:19: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." Here is God again saying, "My will is where my love for sinners starts. It doesn't start with your worthiness, it starts with me and my eternal purpose, which is mysterious and which I haven't revealed to you."

And one of the most powerful passages making this point is 1 John 4:9-10: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." We don't get to say, "I loved God so he loves me." We can't even say, "God knew that I would love him, and so he loves me." Because that would still root his love in our love.

No, God is stripping us of our ability to brag or be puffed up in ourselves.

He says, “I love you outside of you, prior to you, and before you. I set my love on you, and *that* explains why you now love me.” God is the explanation for why God loves you. You are not the explanation for his love.

Now, if you want to find all your joy and hope in yourself, this is going to be terrible news, because God is taking all of that away and leaving you with nothing here. But in the gospel God has been teaching us to find our worth in Christ, not us. You don’t need to be enough. You don’t need to be great. Why would you? God loves you apart from your works. He loves you before anything you might have or contribute. Why do you need to be big so that you can feel good about yourself? The opinion of God is more important than all that.

He knows you through and through, and in Christ he says, “I accept you, and I love you, and I beautify you. I will make the unlovely to be lovely.”

Now, you might ask, “How can I know? How do I know God is love? How can anyone prove it?” And Paul has an answer. And it’s not in you. It’s here in the text. In verse 8 Paul says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

So think about this: you can see God’s love. You can know God’s love. God’s love showed itself in space and time. He showed his love in history, in real events. His love wasn’t just a feeling or a sentiment: his love moved into action. Love is not just a feeling: love is God moving himself toward the unworthy and unlovely. How does he show it?

Paul says, God’s love is revealed by Christ’s death. His love is prior to the death, which means that Jesus came *because* God set his love on sinners. But this is the next and last point of this passage: the improbable death of Christ.

### **3. Christ’s Death**

You see, third, Paul takes us to Christ’s death.

I called this improbable because of what Paul says here. In verse 7 he is showing us what he’s been building toward. Do the equation: we are unlovely. We are weak. We are unrighteous. We are ungodly. And Paul says, “Look. We know that it’s possible that someone might die for someone who is good.” Right?

One of the things that makes *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens so powerful is the willingness of Sydney Carton to die in the place of Charles Darnay. Why is Carton willing to die? Because he knows that Lucie loves Charles. Charles is a good man. And so Carton takes Darnay’s place. In Carton’s eyes, Darnay is a good man, and because he loves Lucie, he’s willing to lay his life down.

But you know, what is so powerful about that story is how unusual it is. It is truly difficult to find very many examples of anyone willing to really lay his life down for another person, even a good person. Paul says, "One will scarcely die for a righteous person." The fictional Sydney Carton did it, but we can at least imagine this since Charles Darnay was a good man after all, right? It kind of makes sense that this happened.

But what if it wasn't a good man? How many people do we know who would see an evil, and even useless or worthless person on death row who committed horrible crimes and say, "I'll take his place so he can go free"? It's not only rare, but we'd probably think it was crazy. But Jesus has a different perspective: it's grace. It's amazing grace. To lay your life down for a criminal? And Paul says, "Jesus did it. That's how great the love of God is."

He's not just saying that his grace is amazing, but he's saying that he shows it in costly ways. Here he's saying, God doesn't just love you, but he loves you in a way that isn't cheap. He loves you in a way that's *costly*.

God shows his love for us in this: "While we were still sinners; while we were still villains; while we were still his enemies, Christ died for us." Jesus died for bad guys. He died for us.

## Conclusion

In the gospel, God loves the unlovable, and he loves people who can really give him nothing and enrich him zero. I've made that case. I mentioned before how different this is than the way the world thinks. We instinctively love useful people, and we instinctively despise people who take and drain and don't contribute.

So I've got two applications as we close. Here is the first one: God has shown his love for you. So don't make his love void by living as if his love does suddenly now hinge on you and your performance. In the larger context of Romans, this is what Paul is aiming at: you are not why God loves you.

So really live in God's grace, and find your worth not through performance or work, but by believing what God says about you: you are his.

He loves you. In Christ, he accepts you and welcomes you into his family. You honor God, and give glory to Christ when you believe his promise of the gospel. You dishonor him when you say, "Well really I do need to clean myself up before he'll love me. I need to be good. I need to be presentable."

Believe the gospel, embrace Christ, rest in him and receive the good news. That's the first application. And it's an application that if you won't do this one, then don't bother with the second.

Because here is the second application, and it's the one I want to leave you with today: if God has loved you from his own gratuitous generosity, and not because you are useful, then let your love for others be like that, too.

This will challenge many of us, including me. Do you know people whom it feels like they just take and take, and never give? Do you know people who always seem to want something but seem to have very little to contribute? We should be wise in how we help other people, so that we are not enabling self-destruction, but here's what I wonder: what would it look like to transfer the generosity of God toward you into your own generosity toward others? In practice, what might that look like? Let me give you one example from Scripture:

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul says that the Macedonian Christians gave what he calls "beyond their means, of their own accord." So the Macedonian Christians gave out of a state of poverty. Why did they do that? John Chrysostom gives us a clue:

"The secret of the Macedonians' zeal was that first, they gave themselves to the Lord. Everything else flowed from that. As a result, when they showed mercy they were not filled with pride but rather displayed great humility and heavenly wisdom."

These were people who knew the grace of God. The Lord displayed his love for them because Christ died for them when they were weak. And so they displayed the love God had given them by giving of themselves for others. Are you willing to be poured out even for people who can't help or pay you back?

This is what you might call a horizontal application: Because God has done this (vertical) we're enabled to let go of ourselves and our preferences because we have a God who has the things we care about handled (horizontal). Wolfgang Musculus, the Reformed theologian makes a similar application here:

"The fullness of piety is comprised in these three parts: First, that we give ourselves first and foremost to the Lord. Second, that we give ourselves also to those who are ministers of the Lord by the will of God. Third, that we love the brothers and sisters, and support them in their needs with all our strength."

Our God loved us first. His love for you doesn't depend on you. You cannot make yourself more lovable to him, more acceptable to him. You are accepted in Christ, not for any worth in yourself. Let's love others with the same kind of love God has poured out on us.

*Let's pray.*