

“While We Were Still Sinners”

For our text this morning, I chose Romans 5:1-11. **[Read]**

Verse 8 really draws my attention: “*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

This is a statement with huge implications. It is a radical statement in a world where violence settles arguments, where vengeance seems to have the last word.

It is a radical statement in a world where grudges are passed on from generation to generation, where old scores, long-standing hatred, deeply-rooted prejudice build and maintain walls between neighbors.

This is a radical statement in a world where there is “no such thing as a free lunch,” where everything—even air and water and the basic necessities of life—will cost you something. In a world where even compassion has strings attached, everything is tit-for-tat, an eye for an eye.

In this world—where violence and vengeance and economics have the upper hand—we have *this* statement from Paul, which flies in the face of the ways of our world. It is a declaration of true peace, given out of love, not based on deserving or earned merit, but pure, free grace.

“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

In a world of armed conflicts galore, this is a declaration of true peace! Paul tells us in Romans 5 that we have been justified through faith—meaning that we have right standing with God—through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, we have peace with God.

Paul uses four words in this passage to describe our human condition: we are powerless (6), ungodly (6), sinners (8), and God's enemies (10). On our own we are in a state of insurgency, hostility, steeped in our own sins—on our own, we are God's enemies. But through the work of Jesus Christ peace is extended to us.

It's like a king offering peace to his enemies, to those who tried to overthrow him. He proposes a peace settlement. And if they accept his offer of peace and go to his city, he sends them welcoming words, and allows them to enter his home. Those who were his enemies he now invites to sit down and eat with him in his banquet hall.

So it is with us. Through Jesus Christ, we can enter God's presence, standing in his grace. Through Jesus Christ we have peace with God.

“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

We are used to the language of our culture about rights, fairness, achievement, so these words of Scripture are hard for us to believe.

While we were STILL SINNERS, NOT when we were already scrubbed clean, NOT when we had everything figured out, NOT when we finally kept all the rules, NOT when we had convinced God to like us!

He died for us while we were still sinners: when we were STILL filthy, STILL corrupted by sin, still dragging our burdens, hopeless, powerless, lost, dead.

We didn't have to have our act together first. We didn't--and we don't even now--have to earn God's favor. He died for us AS WE WERE. It was for sinners that Christ died. *Sinners.*

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

I didn't always believe this. I thought God loved me and saved me because I was a good kid. Because for the sake of God's call, our family gave up the comforts of American living to be missionaries in Mexico... I thought I was saved and loved because *I* was a good girl--because I had good grades and went to church. Or that somehow I was more spiritual, more holy--*that's* why he loved me.

One night my high school youth pastor said something I'll never forget. He told us that we weren't any better than non-Christians. *We might be better off, he said, but we aren't better.*

The Holy Spirit began to change my heart and help me see, to use Philip Yancey's phrase, "what is so amazing about grace."

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Even the apostle Paul includes himself in that statement. "While WE," he says. This is the apostle Paul, God's chosen instrument to proclaim the gospel, who we learn about in Phil 3 was the ideal Jew, a Hebrew of Hebrews; who was zealous for God and a highly moral person.

This great apostle includes himself as a sinner, as one of the powerless enemies of God!

I am beginning to see that I am still a sinner, hopeless on my own--*but a sinner saved by grace.* Just because I am a Christian-- just because I give Christ my highest allegiance--doesn't mean that I am better than anyone else.

I am a sinner saved ONLY by God's grace--because in his great love he took pity on me. It is only because of his love that I am where I am.

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

To BELIEVE this statement means we recognize our sinfulness, our need for reconciliation, our distance from God. It means that we admit we would be utterly lost were it not for God's grace. It means that we acknowledge that we are absolutely, totally dependent on Jesus Christ.

To digest this fully means that we are deeply grateful for this immense gift that we don't deserve.

To believe this means we recognize that our salvation comes through faith in GOD--and we humbly accept his promise to act for us. It is faith in God and his promises, not faith in ourselves (and what we can do for God).

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Do you believe this? Has it sunk into the very roots of who you are?

David Seamands, a Christian counselor, wrote this: "Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that

the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people... We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live. The good news of the gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions."

It's so easy to still fall back on our self-doubts and to somehow still believe that we have to earn God's love. That we have to jump up and down to get the attention of the Almighty, convince him to forgive us just this once. Paul declares that because of Jesus we are freed from those fears and insecurities!

If we truly received God's grace, my friends, we would be transformed! We would be freed people: free to love and be loved. After all, there is nothing we can do to change God's love for us! It is unconditional! He loves us no matter what!

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Dear brothers and sisters, we are surrounded by people who need to hear this! We are surrounded by people who are broken, shattered by evil and abuse; people who are stuck in bad decisions, chained by generations of sin, people oppressed, disillusioned... people who need God.

Every day we see people who need to experience God's grace... people who try anything but church to fill their need. "Church! Why would I go there?" They ask, "They would just make me feel worse."

If we truly received God's grace, we would show grace to others. Our capacity to *accept* grace is closely connected with our capacity to *give* it. If we know that it is not OUR scrubbed faces that got God's forgiveness--then why do we demand that others have to scrub their faces before they even *approach* God?

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Knowing that we are the recipients of God's unlimited, unconditional grace, we are to be people that show and live grace, who when we are cut, we bleed grace.

May we welcome ALL people into our midst--no matter how dirty or how messed up, no matter from what walk of life.

May we show love to ALL those who are in need around us, inviting them into God's presence, that they too might experience God's grace.

As we gather around the Lord's table this morning, may we be reminded that we are invited to the table because of grace. Not because of us, but because of God's love for us. Because of the grace shown in Jesus' death on the cross, we have peace with the Creator of all. We are able to participate in the Lord's supper together because "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Amen.