

# **The Timing of God's Love Matters**

## **Romans 5:6-11**

How well do you know the love of God towards you? When Paul prays for the Ephesians, he specifically asks that they would “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”.

“Surpassing knowledge” =

- going beyond intellectual knowledge, into the realm of experience.
- going beyond what your mind could possibly comprehend.

Imagine the greatest love you could possibly conceive, and God's love is greater than that. How well do you know the love of God towards you?

Love is personal. Love has an object towards whom it is directed. Does God's love towards you amaze you? Does his love towards you even make you feel good inside? I hesitated to say that, because we have made an idol of our feelings. But the truth is that God's love towards you ought to affect you in the depth of your soul. Don't expect to have warm feelings all the time. But neither should you exclude your feelings from the equation entirely.

How well do you know the love of God towards you? How do you come to know the love of God anyway? How do you get to know the love of God more fully?

You get to know the love of God towards you by paying attention to

- what he says to you
- and what he does for you.

And, specifically in the passage today...

- paying attention to the timing of his words and actions.

God may be the Sovereign God of the Universe, but he is also a person. By person, I mean that he is personal. The fact that we are persons means that we

have the capacity to live in relationship with other persons. You may not be able to see God with your eyes or hear him with your ears. But He is a real person who desires a personal relationship with you.

God, as a person, has spoken love towards you in his Word.

And God, as a person, has acted love towards you in his Son, Jesus Christ.

The question is whether or not you are paying attention to Him.

Read Romans 5:6-11.

6     For  
          while we were still weak,  
          at the right time  
              Christ died for the ungodly.  
7     For one will scarcely die for a righteous person-  
          though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die-  
8     but  
       God shows his love for us  
          in that while we were still sinners,  
              Christ died for us.

The timing in this verse is everything. Paul uses the time indicator “while” three times in these verses.

“while we were still weak”

“while we were still sinners”

“while we were enemies”

God, acted out his love for you “while” you were these things.

And then Paul adds, this was “at just the right time.”

The action of love was nothing less than the death of Jesus Christ, God’s beloved Son. But the timing of this act is what is so important.

Paul is not talking about timing in the sense of “history”, at least not in the way that an historian speaks of sequential events. Jesus died historically some 2,000 years ago. That was before you were even born. But it was also “after” a

whole lot of people had lived and died. But Paul is not speaking about the moment in history being “the right time”.

Paul is speaking about spiritual timing as it relates to your heart, and his heart. God acted lovingly towards you, at the right time. At what time was that?

“While you were weak or helpless.”

“While you were still a sinner.”

“While you were God’s enemy.”

Technically, all three of these are interrelated and interdependent. They together communicate one truth. But we will pull them apart and look at them individually today. Each concept has something to offer.

In what sense were we weak or helpless or powerless? Calvin says, “when we were without strength” Powerless, helpless, without strength... to do what? In the context, we were powerless to justify ourselves. We were powerless to bring ourselves back into a right relationship with God. We were helpless to fix the relationship that had been broken by our sin.

Having a sense of helplessness is terrible. I do not really wish it on anyone. And yet, Paul says that each of us was once in this condition. In order to enjoy sweet fellowship with God it is necessary that we love that which is good and hate that which is evil. God is good. Sin is evil. But that is precisely the problem. We don’t really love God. And we really like that which is evil.

This is what it means to be “ungodly.” To be ungodly is to not love God. You love something, or someone, more than God. Ultimately, you love yourself rather than God.

If you haven’t figured this out already, there is a general life principle that you need to learn. As a general rule, people love those that love them. And usually, when we act in loving ways towards people, we are hoping that they will love us in return.

Take a moment and try to think of any people that you intensely love that are hateful and cruel to you. The examples are few and far between of people that love those that do not love them.

Now, do not hear me say that it is wrong to love those who love you. Or that it is wrong to want others to love you in return for your acts of love.

But this general principle has some real damaging effects when it comes to understanding God's love towards us. Our general tendency is to think that God's love for us is "like" the general love that we see around us. God loves us, after we love him. And if we want God to love us, we should start serving him, and that will affect God enough that he will love us more.

There are at least two problems with this sort of thinking. First, it goes directly against what God tells us about his love. Second, it makes God's love of no use to us whatsoever.

God's Word tells us that at the time of our being weak, helpless, and without strength to love God, God loved us. Have you ever grappled with the sobering reality that you do not truly love God, or at least do not apart from Christ's working in you by his Holy Spirit?

I know that we are all, because of grace, becoming lovers of God. But have you ever taken a sincere look at yourself and acknowledged to God that you really do not love him. Not consistently... Not faithfully...

I still remember coming to grips with why I was having such difficulty spending time in God's Word and prayer. Very simply: I really did not love God.

Try telling that to someone near you: I really have very little interest in what you have to say. In fact, I would really rather spend time with any number of people than with you. What effect will that have on your relationship with them? I can tell you it will not go well. Most of us keep those sorts of thoughts and feelings to ourselves. Well, the Bible tells us that we ARE sinners. We don't simply commit sins. We ARE sinners by nature.

Ephesians tells us that we are "dead in our sins". The desires of our heart are not for God and so we make choices for sin. The problem is not just on the level of having made a bad choice. The problem is on the level of our very nature.

We are sinners. And what is more, we are utterly helpless to change the fact that we are sinners.

Sometimes, I will give advice to people who do not have many friends. I tell them to quit looking for someone to love them, and get busy finding someone to love. I think that this is generally good advice. But often people have little or nothing in them to love someone else. They are empty of love.

This is what it means to be weak, and helpless, and lacking strength. Your problem did not start with you. We will look at that next week. It started with Adam. And because your problem did not start with you, neither will the solution. You are truly powerless to change your heart from being ungodly to being godly. And if God can only love you after you have become godly, you are in a world of hurt.

But... into your condition as a helpless sinner, God's love is poured. God doesn't love you according to the principles of this world. God demonstrated HIS love for YOU, in that while you were still a helpless sinner, Christ died for you. Jesus did not die for you because you loved him. He did not even die for you because you would love him. He loved you and died for you "AS A SINNER".

Every time I think about these things, I find myself saying, "Is this really true? Does God really love me like this? How is this possible? And doesn't that mean that I could really take advantage of that sort of love?" That last question will have to wait until later. Paul will get to it in chapter 6.

But the others can be answered very emphatically: This is what God's Word and Actions clearly demonstrate. Do you think about God's love toward you in this way? Or do you let the "general principle" distort your grasp of God's love? You see, it is the timing of God's love that matters. If God cannot love you when you are a helpless sinner, there will always remain a barrier between you and God's love.

"When, therefore, we were weak, that is, when we were in no way worthy or fit that God should look on us, at this very time Christ died for the ungodly: for the beginning of religion is faith, from which they were all alienated, for whom Christ died." Calvin

A minute ago, I asked you if you had ever grappled with the reality that you did not love God. More importantly, have you ever grappled with the truth that God loves you “as an unholy sinner”?

“That God should love the good, the righteous, the pure, the godly is what we can understand; but that the infinitely Holy should love the unholy, and give his Son for their redemption, is the wonder of all wonders.” Hodge

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

I believe that this verse essentially says the same thing as John 3:16.

**John 3:16** <sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world,<sup>1</sup> that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

What is John trying to get across when he says, “For God so loved the **world**.”?

Most people think that John is describing the universal nature of God’s love. “The world” expresses that God loves everyone. But I think that thinking this way rips out the heart of John’s point.

If you skip over vv. 17-18 and look at verse 19, you will find that John defines the world as those who “loved the darkness.”

<sup>ESV</sup> **John 3:19** And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.

The point of verse 16 is not so much the “universality of God’s love”, but the “quality of God’s love.” God loves those who loved the darkness and whose deeds were evil. How do you apply this to your life? Do you know your own helplessness

to make yourself a lover of God? Do you believe that Jesus died to pay the penalty for this very sin? It is God's love that saves sinners.

It is not our love for God that saves us. It is his love for us, personally and individually.

The Cross is the proof of God's love to you at just the right time. It is a sort of love that goes against the general principle of love that we see in the world. All of your hopes of salvation are pinned solely on the love of God for the ungodly. At no point does the Christian rest in his or her ability to love God.

ESV **1 John 4:10** 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.

"If he loved us because we loved him, he would love us only so long as we love him, and on that condition; and then our salvation would depend on the constancy of our treacherous hearts. But as God loved us as sinners, as Christ died for us as ungodly, our salvation depends, as the apostle argues, not on our loveliness, but on the constancy of the love of God." Hodge

We could end right here and we would have plenty on which to chew. But we have not dealt with the third "while" – while we were enemies.

9     Since, therefore,  
          we have now been justified by his blood,  
          much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.  
10    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.

Which is more difficult?

- a. to die for an enemy
- b. to give life to a friend

Of course - to die for you enemy

When someone is born again by the Spirit of God, they are given a new heart. This new heart is a gift from God and its deepest yearning is to know and love God. God also unites a person to Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit. And, of course, the Holy Spirit is powerful. He is able to work in such a way that we begin to love God.

Without this working of the Spirit there is no salvation. But, this working of the Spirit in our hearts is far from complete. And so, as Christians we sometimes feel the weight of our failure to love God MORE after we are born again. We think to ourselves, "Of course we did not love God before we were saved, but now that we are saved, we ought to love God, right?" It is our duty!

And of course, it is our duty. No one has a right to think that they are saved and care little about conquering sin. And, technically speaking, as Christians, we are sinning in the presence of grace in our lives. We are sinning when we no longer are enslaved to sin. And, it is the Christian, who knows something of the love of God, who is often most troubled by current struggles with stubborn sin.

But again, I believe it is timing that should help us in our struggle. It is the timing of God's love that matters. If when you were God's hated enemy, he was able to love you. Now that you are reconciled to him as his friend, do you think that he will be unable to love you.

"If the greater benefit has been bestowed, the lesser will not be withheld. If Christ has died for his enemies, he will surely save his friends." Hodge.

If while you had no love for God he was able to love you, will he not be able to continue loving you, even though your love for him is small and inconsistent.



The focus is taken off of you. The strength of your love for God is not the point. It is certainly not the engine that drives you to God. The driving force of all salvation is the love of God. And this love was first poured out on enemies. And now that the enemies have been made friends, that same love will finish the job.

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

Paul concludes his argument with praise to God. There is joy in his heart because of who God is. There is boasting that flows from his lips because of what God has done through Jesus Christ.

“When we glory that God is ours, whatever blessings can be imagined or wished, ensue and flow from this fountain; for God is not only the chief of all good things, but also possesses in himself the sum and substance of all blessings; and he becomes ours through Christ.” Calvin

How well do you know God’s love for you?

When God says to you, “Be still, and know that I am God,” are you listening?  
Are you paying attention to what God says to you about his love?

Are you paying attention to the timing of Jesus’ death on your behalf?

All true love and devotion that we as humans give to God is the product of God’s love for us.

Turn with me to Luke 7:37.

**Luke 7:37-38** <sup>37</sup> And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, <sup>38</sup> and standing behind him at his feet,

weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

Out of this sinful woman's heart flowed more love than came out of all of the Pharisees combined, why?

Jesus explains to the Pharisee, whose name happened to be Simon, why:

**Luke 7:41-47** <sup>41</sup> "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." <sup>44</sup> Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven - for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."

"for she loved much" is not here the cause of her being forgiven much. It is the evidence that she has been forgiven much.

The final sentence is perfectly clear: He who is forgiven little, loves little. He who does not understand the immensity of God's love toward him AS A HELPLESS SINNER will never love like this woman loved.

You see, the question is not, "Do I love God?"

The first question is always, "Do I know the surpassing love of God towards me, AS A SINNER?"

How well do you know God's love for you?

