

Romans 5:1-8: ¹Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

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

The Sinner's Friend

INTRODUCTION

A fifth-grade teacher was leading her class in a study of definitions. She read the words, and the children would take turns giving their own definitions. All the children were doing a great job on this particular day. One after another each gave excellent definitions of uncle, aunt, cousin, neighbor—much to the delight not only of the teacher, but also of the whole class. But when Sarah's turn came it looked like their perfect record would be broken. Sarah was the first student to hesitate—the eyes of the whole class were focused on her—and she froze. The word that she had been given to define was friend. Simple as it might be, Sarah couldn't think of a single definition for friend. Finally, after a great deal of mental effort, she blurted out this definition: "A friend is someone who likes me, even though he knows me!"

You won't find Sarah's definition in any dictionary, but doesn't her definition make perfect sense? The better we know someone, the better we know his or her faults. Truly, a friend is someone who likes you, even though he knows you!

3. We might die for our friends, but certainly not our enemies.

Someone once said, we choose our friends, not our family. Kacey Musgraves sings in her song, “Family is Family”: Family is family, in church or in prison You get what you get, and you don’t get to pick ‘em They might smoke like chimneys, but give you their kidneys. Yeah, friends come in handy, but family is family. That’s true. The brother that drives you crazy—the weird uncle—the sister-in-law you can’t stand—well, they’re family and you have no choice in the matter—but you’d probably would give them a kidney because they’re family!

When it comes to friends, though, we chose our friends. A friend might be a co-worker, a neighbor, another person with the same interests or hobbies as you. But if a person acts weird or drives you crazy—or disagrees with you on everything—or insults your favorite football team—you probably won’t choose that person for a friend.

And who would want to make friends with someone who’s evil and malicious. I don’t think any of us would choose a drug dealer for a friend. Family is family—but friendship is another thing. And when it comes right down to it, we make and keep friends for what we can gain from the friendship. If the friendship costs too much—if it becomes too much of a burden—we sever the relationship.

You can understand why the Holy Spirit says through the apostle Paul, “⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.” Who among you would die for a man like Kim Jong-un, the leader of North Korea, who recently test fired a missile capable of carrying a nuclear payload, and may have had his half-brother assassinated?

As human beings, we’re might die for our friends—it all depends on how good of a friend he or she is—but when it comes to our enemies, we certainly wouldn’t lay down our lives for the likes of Kim Jong-un!

2. Jesus dies for His enemies.

The Bible teaches that all of us are by nature enemies of God. Our minds are hostile to Him—as sinners we live in rebellion against Him. We are not His friends—we don't want God in our lives—we don't want to have anything to do with Him. We deserve nothing but God's wrath against sin. We may try to downplay sin to downplay God's wrath, but it's a futile endeavor that doesn't change a thing.

We choose who we want for friends because their friendship benefits us in some way: A hunting or fishing buddy; someone to go shopping with or has kids our age; someone who laughs at our jokes and takes interest in us—but above all, our friends tend to be people like us.

However, the remarkable thing about God's grace is that Jesus didn't choose us as His friends because our friendship would benefit Him. He didn't choose us as His friends because we were likeable. Jesus chose us as His friends because He loved the creatures He created.

The remarkable thing about Jesus' friendship is that He laid down His life for you while we were still enemies of God—His enemies! A little while before He was arrested and taken to trial, Jesus said to His disciples, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Even though His friends abandoned Him in His hour of greatest need—they weren't willing to die for their friend Jesus—Jesus died for them—and for us!

That's the kind of true friendship that exists in the heart of God—God loves us even though He knows us! God knows that we are often not very good friends. We don't show our friendship with God when we sleep in on Sundays, never open our Bibles, or use His name in vain. We don't show our friendship with our neighbor when we talk back to our parents, betray our spouses; when we're quick to criticize but slow to complement; when we're willing to spend hours in front of the TV but then tell people we don't have any time to help them.

Indeed, no one knows you better nor loves you more than God. In our text, the apostle Paul says, “⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” If it is true that, “A friend is someone who likes me, even though he knows me,” then what a friend we have in Jesus! Jesus knows our every weakness, our every sin, our every hang-up, yet He doesn’t abandon us like an earthly friend will when we become too much of a burden. Instead, Jesus bids us to give Him our burdens—our every weakness, our every hang-up, our every sin—that He might give us rest.

1. More than friends, family!

Earlier, I mentioned how we choose our friends, but not our family. No matter what our quirks and shortcomings might be, families stick together. We love our children even when we don’t like them—even when they make bad choices and do embarrassing things—because they are our children. And our children still love us despite all the mistakes we’ve made raising them. In church or in prison “Family is family” because family is united by blood.

Sometimes, when you sin, you may feel that God doesn’t like you very much. Or, when bad things happen, you may think that God has abandoned you. Certainly, God doesn’t like the sinful choices we make, but when you see Jesus on the cross you know that God loves you—that He forgives you—and that He will never leave you or forsake you—because you are more than His friends—your are His family—a family that has been established by the blood of Christ.

God has graciously made you His children in Holy Baptism where He baptized you into the death and resurrection of Jesus. And because you’re His children, He loves you even though you’re often not very lovable. But that doesn’t mean He’s going to ignore your sinful behavior.

Like a good father, our heavenly Father disciplines us to remind us that we're part of His family, as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us (Heb. 12:6) "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

And sometimes in this sinful world, the Lord uses suffering to bring you closer to Him and to strengthen you so that you can endure as His children in this fallen world. Paul writes, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

You don't suffer because God is angry at you or because He's punishing you—Jesus took your punishment on the cross. Suffering helps you learn compassion and how to be like Christ to your neighbor in need. And suffering is a reminder that you are no longer friends with the world—you are aliens and strangers in this world because you belong to God—you are God's family, washed and redeemed by the blood of Christ.

CONCLUSION:

What a friend you have in Jesus, who calls you "friend" even though He knows you—who laid down His life for you so that God could call you more than friend—so God could call you, "family"!

In Jesus' Name. Amen.