

May 19 Lesson 12 (NIV)

## Reconciled to God

Devotional Reading: Acts 2:37–47

Background Scripture: Romans 5:1–11

Romans 5:1–11

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

<sup>6</sup> You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

<sup>9</sup> Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! <sup>10</sup> For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! <sup>11</sup> Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

### Key Text

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,—Romans 5:1*

## Examining Our Faith

### Unit III: Standing in the Faith

Lessons 10–13

### Lesson Outline

## Introduction

- A. Boasting Now and Then
- B. Lesson Context

### I. Effects of Justification (Romans 5:1–5)

- A. Peace with God (v. 1)
- B. Standing in Grace (v. 2)
- C. The Realm of Boasting (vv. 3–5)

### II. Effects of the Cross (Romans 5:6–11)

- A. Reconciled to God (vv. 6–10)  
*The Right Time Forgiveness*
- B. We Rejoice (v. 11)

## Conclusion

- A. Hope vs. Shame
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## How to Say It

MessiahMeh-sigh-uh.

Pax Romana (*Latin*)Pahks Ro-mah-nah.

## Introduction

### A. Boasting Now and Then

Boasting in modern American culture is often seen as unattractive, even offensive. We tend to see it as a mark of insecurity, arrogance and superiority, and/or a disregard for the self-respect of others. We do make certain exceptions, such as when an underdog in a sporting event predicts a win for his or her team or celebrates an unexpected victory.

In ancient societies, however, boasting was part of the culture of warriors as they overcame their foes. Of course, the one boasting had to deliver on the words or risk looking foolish (1 Kings 20:11). But boasting itself did not seem problematic. People often thought of honor as a zero-sum game—“For me to increase my honor, I must diminish yours.” Boasting allowed individuals to position themselves in society, as long as they could deliver.

Paul offers a radical alternative to the Greco-Roman understanding of self-promotion, based on his understanding of Jesus’ death on the cross. He excluded it altogether because all are in the same position with respect to God (Romans 3:27; see lesson 10). Then Paul opened a new possibility for boasting, but not about our triumphs.

### B. Lesson Context

Romans 5 depends entirely on Paul’s previous discussion of the human response to the gospel found in Romans 4. Paul has argued, based on the experience of Abraham, that the true basis for

a relationship with God is trust in his promises, that is, faith (see lesson 11). Chapter 5 extends the argument.

Our text today makes an important argument about why followers of Jesus both build their lives based on trust in God's promises yet still experience hardship. Those suffering might wonder whether the new era of God's mercy had dawned or not. In the past, prophets had revealed certain hardships to be God's judgment on sin (examples: Numbers 14:20–23; Jeremiah 21:4–14). Is a Christian's suffering also God's judgment?

Elsewhere, Paul boasted about his own suffering as evidence of God's work in his life (2 Corinthians 4:7–12; 11:23–30). Paul would go on to be executed in Rome in AD 67 or 68. In his estimation, this surely was another opportunity to imitate Christ (Philippians 1:21; 3:7–11). The transformation to be like Christ has several parts, including a new understanding of suffering, reconciliation, growing friendship with God, and ultimately rescue from the power of sin and death. Paul explores each dimension of these implications in today's text.

## **I. Effects of Justification (Romans 5:1–5)**

### **A. Peace with God (v. 1)**

**1. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,**

Because God declares us accepted based on our *faith* in the Messiah, Jesus, this trust yields certain effects. Justification is not simply an accounting trick God makes. It begins a transformation of life.

*We* includes both Jews and Gentiles, with God showing no partiality to either. Because of God's work to keep the ancient promises to Abraham, everyone can have the kind of *peace* of which Paul speaks. The concept of peace had political implications for first-century subjects of Rome. By a mixture of force and political maneuvering, the Roman Empire had built the *Pax Romana* ("the Roman peace," lasting from 27 BC to AD 180). In contrast to peace enforced at the point of the sword, God offers genuine reconciliation of all people to himself through Jesus' faithful obedience (see Romans 5:19). Paul exhorts the Romans to have peace among themselves (14:19). Peace with God leads to (or should lead to) peace among followers of God when exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22–23).

### **B. Standing in Grace (v. 2)**

**2a. through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.**

*Access* to God's *grace* does not derive from an accident of birth or even from doing good deeds. It comes *by faith* in God's gracious offer of mercy. When *we stand*, we take confidence in God's promise, building our lives on it (compare Matthew 5:24–25). Because Jesus trusted God, those who follow him may do so as well. Regarding the access that results, see also Ephesians 2:18; 3:12.

**2b. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.**

We come to the major assertion of our passage. The word *glory* draws on an old biblical theme with several dimensions. Some texts use the word to refer to God's overwhelming presence among human beings (examples: Exodus 40:34; 1 Kings 8:11; Ezekiel 1:28). The Psalms use the term to refer to God's splendor in Heaven, which is accessible in controlled ways to humans on earth (examples: Psalms 24:8–10; 29:9; 79:9). God's glory also appears when saving humans (example: Isaiah 40:5).

The final example is especially fitting here. The glory of God comes to light in the saving work of Jesus in his crucifixion and resurrection (Romans 6:4). God's glory is also evident in the life of the church (see 1 Corinthians 10:31; 2 Corinthians 4:6) and at the final judgment, when all things will become subject to God and open to his full presence (Romans 8:18; 9:23). For this reason, we *boast* in expectant *hope* that God has forgiven us and given us new life now and in Heaven.

### C. The Realm of Boasting (vv. 3–5)

#### **3. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;**

This second translation *glory* creates a wordplay that does not exist in the original Greek text since the words being translated aren't the same. The word translated "glory" here is translated "boast" in 2 Corinthians 10:8, 13; etc.; that is the sense here as well. With this word, Paul opens the possibility that Christians might celebrate, not only while experiencing pleasant things but also *in sufferings*. These words do not refer to mild annoyances or everyday problems but to devastating experiences. Tribulation can result from doing evil (Romans 2:9), though this is not the sense here. Instead, we think of tribulation that confronts the faithful who overcome it by the power of Christ's love (see 8:35; compare 2 Corinthians 1:4; 2:4; 4:17) and patience (Romans 12:12). Such hardship is an opportunity for God's grace to be revealed.

Many ancient people believed in the value of bearing suffering, not as an absolute good but as an important feature of the wise life. Paul is not arguing for a masochistic view of life, but instead that troubles and pain need not diminish our joy in Christ nor define our self-understanding. Suffering can nurture *perseverance* if we face the tribulation with the proper spiritual attitude. For Paul, growth occurred in the context of the mutual love between God and humankind (see Romans 5:5, below). It does so because the suffering itself is part of God's movement in the present age to bring about the new era that commenced at Calvary and comes to full blossom at the Last Judgment.

Boasting in tribulation makes sense not because of the suffering itself but because of the consequences of endurance. Yet such boasting would have seemed mad to Paul's ancient audience, just as it may to a modern one. Proper boasting should focus on God's achievements, which become most visible in human weakness (2 Corinthians 12:1–10).

#### **4. perseverance, character; and character, hope.**

The chain of words in verses 4–5 does not imply a straightforward progression from one virtue to another. Rather, the apparent progression reveals the close relationship among the qualities Paul lists. A willingness to endure hardship strengthens a person's *character* and makes it possible to *hope* in a better future. The word translated character is an interesting one, used seven times

in the New Testament, and only by Paul. In addition to the two translations “character” in our text, it is also translated “test” (2 Corinthians 2:9), “proof” or “proved” (8:2; 9:13; 13:3; Philippians 2:22), and “trial” (2 Corinthians 8:2). The overall idea is that of being tested to determine (or improve) one’s mettle. Character should be understood in the positive sense of a high level of integrity that has developed through difficulties. Paul uses the same word several other times in his letters, always to praise people who have faced hardship with courage and love for God and their fellow human beings (“trial” in 2 Corinthians 8:2; etc.).

**5. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.**

Here Paul draws on an old biblical theme according to which God vindicated his people’s *hope* through their restoration to a right relationship with him (examples: Isaiah 49:5–7; Jeremiah 33:6–26; Ezekiel 20:33–44). Those who have hope in God’s saving work, even if they experience social isolation or persecution, still have God’s approval. Therefore, they cannot be shamed in any lasting way.

God’s love is the source of honor. The Greek verb translated *poured out* often refers to the way *the Holy Spirit* comes to followers of Jesus (examples: Acts 2:17, 33; 10:45; Titus 3:6). Here, God’s *love* is shed abroad, indicating the abundance that believers receive.

In the Old Testament, the heart indicates the seat of thinking and reason, not primarily of emotion (example: Genesis 17:17). God had promised to recreate Israel’s heart so the nation could live in harmony with God and one another (Jeremiah 32:39; Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26). The prophets called the people to repentance while also making clear that Israel’s heart surgery depended on God. Paul expands that vision even further by including the Gentiles. Paul clarifies that older tradition by speaking not of observing Torah with a new heart but of dwelling in God’s love and loving him in return (compare Matthew 22:37–40).

## **II. Effects of the Cross (Romans 5:6–11)**

### **A. Reconciled to God (vv. 6–10)**

**6. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.**

Many scholars believe this verse quotes a saying that was circulating in the Roman church. The main argument for this position is that elsewhere Paul speaks of weakness as a positive attribute rather than as something to be overcome (2 Corinthians 12:5–10; 13:4). If this proposal is correct, it is in keeping with Paul’s working to build bridges to his audience, especially when it included many strangers (example: Romans 1:8–15).

The evidence for Paul’s claim that suffering borne faithfully produces spiritual growth comes from the life of *Christ* himself (compare Hebrews 5:8). Christ suffered patiently and voluntarily in part because he knew what would be accomplished through his death (see Philippians 2:6–11). His followers may imitate him in that action (see 2:5).

Paul describes the prior status of all Jesus-followers as both weak and *ungodly*. This is a very strong term in a Greco-Roman context. It might refer to those who ignored the gods or even committed sacrilege against holy places. Christ did not die for the righteous but for the wicked

(Hebrews 3–10; etc.). We were helpless to overcome death and evil until God’s presence among humankind overcame those dangerous forces. God’s mercy extends to those who need it most.

## The Right Time

**7. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.**

The distinction between *a righteous person* and *a good person* is a bit unclear. Probably the latter term refers to a benefactor, or more generically, someone who has done tremendous good for someone else. One might die for such a person as an act of appreciation, loyalty, or simple nobility of heart.

**8. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

The motives described in verse 7 do not apply to Jesus. Christ’s death does not fit the normal pattern of brave, noble deaths for a good cause or as acts marking people as superior to others. Such deaths do occur in the ordinary world, and while they often deserve praise, Jesus’ death is not comparable to theirs. It far exceeds them: *Christ died for* those who had done nothing for him and never could. Paul’s point is not found in the difference between a righteous person and a good one but instead between those for whom some person might die and those for whom Jesus died.

It is, therefore, highly inappropriate, or in fact, blasphemous, to compare Jesus’ death to any other. Christ’s death has no parallel because the reason for it has no parallel. The sustained human commitment to sin necessitated Christ’s saving work. God shows love toward us by the radical nature of Jesus’ death for strangers and enemies.

**9. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!**

*How much more* (also in Romans 5:10, below) introduces an argument from the most difficult task to one less difficult. God has overcome the power of sin and death. Since Jesus has already done the hard work of saving us from the power of sin and death, he can do the much easier work of saving us from *God’s wrath* against unrighteousness (see 1:18). Wrath in this context refers to the last judgment (see 2:5–9), in which the true distinctions between good and evil become unmistakable to all. In that moment of truth-telling, the truth of God’s mercy shown in Christ’s death will win through. Those who trust God’s promises to save through his Son will see their hope become a reality.

The substitutionary death of Jesus paid the price for our sins, a price we could never pay on our own (see Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). Rather, by entering the world of sin and death that humans experience (Hebrews 2:17), God in Christ overcame those great evils and ended the estrangement that separated humanity from our creator. The end of that alienation from God came about because of his actions, not ours. We can be at peace with God. We are new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17); we wear a new name, and we have a new destiny.

**10. For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!**

The final two verses of this section build on the idea of salvation in two ways. First, Paul asserts that Christ's death has made possible our reconciliation to God. While Paul did consider humans as active participants in the process (example: 2 Corinthians 5:20), here he emphasizes God's work rather than human responses. It is puzzling that Paul includes himself among God's (former) enemies since he had always obeyed God with a sincere heart even when he badly misunderstood God's desires (see Acts 22:3–4; Philippians 3:4–6). Yet this understanding reflects his conclusion that "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23) and that keeping the Law of Moses could not reconcile one to God without God's mercy.

Paul's new thought is that humanity can be saved by Christ's *life*. We participate in the life he has brought about through his actions at Calvary. Those who trust God can anticipate rescue from the forces of evil. They will experience Christ's life in their own lives (see also Galatians 2:19–20).

### **B. We Rejoice (v. 11)**

**11. Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.**

Salvation has tangible results in one's attitude toward daily life. Verse 3 raised the possibility of celebrating even the worst parts of life as opportunities to experience God's mercy. But here, the rejoicing focuses on the mercy itself. Those who trust God celebrate the fact that God's mercy extends to all, not just to themselves. They see themselves as part of the grand story of redemption from the power of evil and share that joy with others. Most importantly, their joy comes *through our Lord Jesus Christ*. That is, he is the author, inspirer, and basis of their words of celebration.

The last reference is relevant here: God's act of reconciliation involved not counting our sins against us. God does not pretend them away, but he refuses to let them define the relationship with us.

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Hope vs. Shame**

All human groups believe certain actions are respectable and others unrespectable, with many gradations in between the two poles of honor and shame. Because they followed a crucified Messiah, early Christians had to rethink their cultures' understanding of honor and shame from the ground up. This rethinking allowed them to endure the suffering that families and governments imposed on them for their faith. They concluded that human life was not a contest for a limited supply of honor and that the true fount of honor was God. The God who raised Jesus from the dead would raise them too. They endured suffering, not for its own sake, but because in suffering, they could imitate Jesus Christ. That radical hope allowed them to face public disgrace or private strife with generous hearts and confident minds.

It still can today. The ability to endure suffering as Christ did shows that the new era is in the process of dawning and that God's promises to protect those who trust him are reliable.

## **B. Prayer**

God of our Lord Jesus Christ and of all who follow him, we thank you for not allowing us to be shamed by our failures or even our sins. You have welcomed us into your household as honored members, and for that, we are grateful. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## **C. Thought to Remember**

We have peace with God because Christ paid sin's price for us.<sup>1</sup>

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