

## ***God's Perfect Timing***

Romans Series by Sinclair Ferguson

TEXT: Romans 5:6

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### OPENING PRAYER:

Gracious God and Father, thank you for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you for the ministry of your word, it is a word of grace to us in and through him. And thank you for the spirit of grace, who comes to us as a spirit of grace and glory. We pray that as through your Son's word, and by your Spirit's power. You draw us into your own presence, that we may taste and sense your glory and majesty. That the gospel may seem to us all over again to be glorious good news. That Jesus Christ may appear to us in faith as a marvelous Savior. And that you may be known by us as a caring and loving and devoted father. We ask that -- we come to you this evening with all of our needs, and our sins, with all of our fears our shortcomings, that you would meet our needs in Jesus Christ. So meet them in such a rich fashion, that we may love Him as our Savior. And love the Spirit, who makes him glorious in our eyes. And through their ministry, love you, and adore you, and glorify you. So, we pray our Heavenly Father, that there may be a seamless progression from the worship of our song and prayer to the worship of our hearts. In the study and Ministry of your word. Hear us. Help us we pray for Jesus our Savior's sake. Amen.

Please be seated.

### SCRIPTURE READING:

Now we're turning this evening as we continue to mine a little in Romans chapter five. We come to Romans chapter five, verse six. And to these words of the Apostle Paul,

*"For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly."*

### SERMON:

I know it's hard for you to imagine that it's possible to live in the United States, and to have a single regret that one lives there. But one small regret I have is that at least on the television channels I see,

we never see the great BBC serial entitled, Doctor Who. Some of you, I gather must have seen it or perhaps it is that you have no idea who Doctor Who is. So for the uninitiated, let me explain that Doctor Who is a British Timelord. He travels through the space time continuum, having all kinds of marvelous adventures. And he does this -- and you need to be my generation almost before you remember these things -- he does this in an old British police box. Long before the days of our high technology, if a policeman was summoned, he needed to go to his police box. And they were centered as it were all around the major cities. And when there was a phone call for policemen plod, that would be a light flash on at the top of this police box. You just needed to hope that you weren't in serious difficulty. Since Constable Plod would probably take about 15 minutes to get to his police box -- 10 minutes to understand how you answered the phone, and another 15 minutes to get to the emergency. But Doctor Who possessed one of these boxes. It looked fairly tacky on the outside. But the amazing thing was that when Doctor Who entered his looking like a police box, he could in this box travel through space and time to all kinds of marvelous places. The amazing thing of course was, and this is the point, that Doctor Who's police box was far larger on the inside than it appeared on the outside.

And the reason I regret that you are not inundated with episodes of Doctor Who is because if you are at last it would dawn on you as a Christian believer, if you are one, that this is exactly how the gospel works. That this is exactly how the kingdom of Jesus Christ works. That this is exactly how the Christian life works. From the outside, some of you remember those days, the Christian life seemed singularly unattractive. The Gospel held little appeal, Jesus Christ meant nothing to you. And then, as Paul says, in Second Corinthians 5:17, when you came to faith in Jesus Christ, it was like entering into "a new creation", a new world order. And you realize that you have kept on realizing ever since, that one of the amazing things about this kingdom into which you have been brought -- this new creation of which you are apart, is that it is almost infinitely larger on the inside than it ever seemed to be on the outside. And as we go through our Christian lives, we have all kinds of experiences that underscore how great and glorious this gospel is.

And Paul has reached a point in Romans chapter five, when he is explained to us that we are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. And you remember, perhaps, when you first understood that, and came to faith in Jesus Christ. But now as you have gone on, and you have understood the word better, and you have more experience of how Jesus Christ works in your life, you understand that from that moment, you were united to Jesus Christ, blessing, upon blessing, upon blessing, upon blessing has been poured out upon your life. And you discover that being in Christ, as Paul so often says, is almost infinitely bigger than it appeared to be when you first came to faith.

And the reason for that Paul has been explaining in the first four or five verses is that what God is doing is taking us from justification, from pardon, from acquittal, to the hope of final glory. That is to say in Paul's language, the certainty and assurance of final glory. And as it were, as the gospel dawns on us -- as its truth dawns on us, the riches of that truth more and more build us up and confidence that if God has justified us, then God will glorify us. The very thing that Paul will later say in Romans chapter eight when he says, "those whom God justified God also glorifies". For the fascinating thing about these opening verses of Romans five is the way in which the Apostle Paul weaves together two strands -- almost different colored strands, that both bring us to this hope of glory.

The first is the dawning of the truth of the gospel, in my mind. If I am justified, then that justification is the justification of the last day brought into the present day, and God will never reverse it. And therein lies my confidence -- this great hope of glory. But not just the truth of the gospel to my mind, the

transformation by the gospel of my heart, and my experience. And this is why Paul is woven in us, we remember the way in which we rejoice in our sufferings because suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces this same hope. As we see, Glory began in us in sanctification, the hope of glory flowers in us. These two glorious strands of the gospel are beautifully woven together, and lest we should ever think that this hope could possibly let us down or disappoint us, he says, and yes there is this already already, the love of God that will be fully known in that glory "has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us".

This is why inwardly we have this great confidence as Christians. That often people who aren't Christians simply cannot fathom. This sweet and poised confidence that we will be in glory with our Lord Jesus Christ. How can we be so sure? Because God has already given us a taste of that glory, in the way in which his love has been poured out into our heart.

Now, the fascinating thing is, you would think, no, that's it, that's finito. As far as Paul's concerned. We are up there on the top level of the elevator. But he says, I haven't even started yet. Let's think about this love, he says. And you notice that in the verses that remain, and chapter five verses one to 11, he does a very interesting thing. First of all, he takes us down in order that we may taste the depth of this love that has been poured into our hearts. And then he takes us up. And you notice the language that he begins to use as, Yes, that's true. But there is much more. Yes, that's true. But there is much more. Yes! And there is much more.

Sometimes here on Sunday nights, and, and many of us experienced this, and some of you say, on the way out, as we've been praising God, at the end of the Lord's day, "can it get better than this?" And the answer is, there is much more yet to experience of the glory of God. But if we are to experience it, he says, we need to go down into the foundations in order to rise in our expectations of how much more there is to know of the grace of God in the Gospel.

And that's the reason you'll notice at the beginning of verse six, for the little connective word "for". If you are using the New International Version, as you read through Romans, buy an English Standard Version. Because often these connections are missed, and therefore we don't see how the little Apostle Paul's mind is working. He's moving on. He's saying, now we need to reason this through. We need to be thinking Christians all the time, we need to be thinking Christians. And see how it applies. See how it works out, see what the logic of the gospel is. Now, what's the logic of what he's saying here? God's love has been "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us for". What's he going to say? Now, here is what he's going to say. He wants us -- He wants us to be filled with a wonderful sense of this love being poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. He wants us to know that the hope of glory will not disappoint us, because this love is so great.

But here's the thing to notice. You and I do not measure the greatness of that love by our capacity to experience it. We develop a capacity to experience it by understanding the greatness of God's love. Do I need to say that again? So that you follow what I'm saying? Apparently, I do. We don't measure the greatness of God's love for us by our capacity to experience it. Now that's a mistake many Christians make, isn't it? We live on the basis of our own experience and the measure of that experience. And Paul wants us to be clear that this love that's poured into our hearts must never be measured by the experience we have of it. Rather the experience we have of it needs as it were to develop a capacity to receive the sheer greatness of it. And the greatness of it is not found in my heart. The greatness of it is found in what God has done for me in Jesus cry.

You will never grow as a Christian simply by looking at yourself. Was at Robert Murray McCheyne that said, "For every glance you take at yourself, take 100 glances at the Lord Jesus Christ". That's such an important thing to learn as early as you possibly can in the Christian life. The Christian life is not lived by inward looking, but by Christward gazing. And if you will learn that it will take you through many a hard day, when by instinct, you would turn in upon yourself and measure the love of God for you by what you experience in your heart. That's the reason why the great Scottish theologian of 100 years ago James Denney used to say, "the only thing he envied a Roman Catholic priest was that he could hold up a crucifix before his congregation and say, 'God loves you like that'". You see?

Well, how does he work this out in this amazing verse, "while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly". Well you see he seems to be speaking here about three things, and he describes them, first of all, the objects of this love. Second, the timing of Christ's coming. And three, the measure of God's grace.

Look, first of all, at what he says about the objects of this love. "While we were still weak, Christ died." Now that we're here, obviously, is we believers. Paul is saying, you, Roman believers, myself, my companions here, it was for us that Christ died. But notice, that he doesn't say, it was when we were believers, that Christ died for us. But it was when we were weak that Christ died for us. Now he's, he's going to expand on that word weak. Just look at that word weak. And notice that in the next few verses, Paul will draw a series of parallel expressions to that weakness when we were weak. And then at the end of verse six, "Christ died for the ungodly."

Who are the ungodly? Verse eight, "God shows His love for us. And while we were still sinners, Christ died for us". And then in verse 10, it was "when we were enemies, that we were reconciled to God, by the death of his son". And so he's going to explore that, and you'll need to come along the next few weeks to explore that. But he's beginning with a very simple and profoundly moving statement. He says, it wasn't when we were believers that Christ died for us. Christ doesn't come and die for you because you believe in Him. Christ died for us when we were still weak.

Of course, it means less in a spiritual sense. But you understand what that spiritual sense means, by your own experience of weakness? Have you ever experienced real weakness? Some of you have experienced real physical weakness. When you've been perhaps desperately sick, perhaps in danger of death. And you know what weakness is. Others of us who have never perhaps experienced that kind of physical weakness have experienced a terrible weaknesses as we've watched others who have been sick. Or we've been in situations that we just can't handle. And we look on and we are so weak, to use Paul's language again from Romans chapter eight, that we look at the situation and say I don't even know what to pray for. We kneel at our bedsides and words don't come because we don't have wisdom to know. We feel so totally weak. Somebody we love dearly, and there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. Now, that's the kind of imagery that the apostle is using here about what it means that Christ came to die for us not when we were strong. Not when we had become believers. Not when we had qualified for anything. But he came for us while we were weak.

Think those of us who were here this morning about that paralytic. I was thinking about I'm driving into church this evening. As the ceiling came down and these men Lord him down. That amazing scene and placed them at the, at the feet of Jesus and there he lay on his mat. Was he a quadriplegic? Had he had a bad fall as a youngster? Why was he paralyzed? But paralyzed he was the limbs of his body,

weakened, he couldn't move them no matter how hard he tried, how much he fought, he was absolutely powerless to move. What a scene that must have been. I don't think any artist in the world could conceivably capture this scene that only two people experienced on that day, when the eyes of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ looked into the eyes of that man who was helpless and would have been completely hopeless, were it not for the eyes of his friends, looking down through the hole in the roof that they'd just created. Wouldn't you give worlds? When you give worlds for that gaze of Jesus, on that weak man, and those words, "My son, my son." Wouldn't it be something to hear Jesus say that to you. My son? Was he an orphan? Did his parents abandon him? You know about what -- what must have been evoked in that man's heart when, when after, however long of this awful weakness that could never ever be resolved in this world, our blessed Lord Jesus looked into his eyes and said, "My son, your sins are forgiven. Rise, take up your bed. Walk. Now that's you, isn't it?"

Perhaps that's exactly you. Perhaps in your case, Jesus saw their faith, whoever it was, who prayed for you, who cared for you, who witnessed to you -- who lived before you. And who in the secret place pled with God or God will you come and bring life into this death and strength into this weakness and forgiveness into this absolutely hopeless spiritual situation in which my friend is caught. And the eyes of Jesus looked down upon you in your awful weakness. There was nothing you could do. Nothing you could contribute. You couldn't raise yourself from the dead. You couldn't live the Christian life in your own unaided energy. And the Lord Jesus said, My son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven.

Now here's the thing. It was fully our Lord Jesus Christ's entitlement to crush weak ones to hell. Fully his entitlement to crush weak ones to hell. Did you notice that amazing text? Maybe it appears to often in our order of service because I must say to me, it is one of the most precious verses in the whole of the Bible. "Behold, my servant", this is Isaiah looking forward to the coming of our Lord Jesus, "my servant whom I uphold. My chosen, in whom my soul delights, no wonder I've put my Spirit on him, he will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard on the street". And then this, "A bruised reed he will not break". You youngsters you do that don't know you. You walk past something. You're walking through the fields and there's a bruised reed and you pick it up and you tear it to pieces. And there's a dimly burning wick, and it's smoking and smoldering and so you're snuffed it out, and our Lord Jesus Christ was perfectly entitled to take us who are bruised by sin and broken by the fall and snuff us out. But instead, he comes to this paralytic man. Comes to you in all the ways in which you have been bruised in your sin. And He doesn't break you. He mends you for glory. And he puts his hands around you, and he blows fire into your soul. The fire of the life of grace into your soul. This is what Paul is saying when he says it was when we were weak that God showed His love for us in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, forgive me if you think I'm becoming obsessive about this, but I'm hearing it almost everywhere I turn. This is why the message of the Christian gospel is not to say to people who are bruised and weary and broken, my dear, you need to learn to love yourself. That's not the gospel. Not only is it not the gospel, but it readily hinders the gospel -- because it sends me to a pharmacy that has no medicine to cure me. But the gospel has the cure. It isn't that I turn in on myself and say, oh, I need to learn to love myself, and then things will be better. No, my great need, and this is what the apostle is saying to those of us -- we are all weak, but some of us are almost overwhelmed with our sense of weakness and sinfulness and failure and the ways in which our lives have been virtually destroyed -- either by our sin or by somebody else's sin. And the Gospel comes -- Jesus comes. Imagine Jesus coming to this paralytic man and say, My dear man, I'm so sorry about your situation. Let me help you to love yourself. No! 1000 times no! My son, your sins are forgiven. And now for you and for me even more clearly,

because we know that he has died to bring us the forgiveness of sins, so greatly does he love me. And you see that's what causes the desert to blossom as a rose. And the bruised and broken and weary heart to be revived by grace. That at last, thank God, somebody loves me. And the one who loves me is the one who has come to bring me the forgiveness of my sins. Even to die for me. Now, remember the point. The point is, it's not my experience, that is the measure of this love. It's what he has done for the weak. That's the measure of this love. "Amazing love. How can it be? That thought" -- Now, listen -- Grace is never amazing unless the next sentence begins "That Thou." You see? Amazing grace, no, no "Amazing grace that thou my God should die for me".

Now quickly, look at the second thing that Paul says, and we can deal with this just in a minute, I think. He speaks about the objects of this amazing love that God has poured out into our hearts when we were weak, Christ came for us. And then notice what he says about the timing, about the Kairos. You're not speaking here so much about the passage of time that we measured on our watches, but significant time. Sometimes we say, just in time. Just the right time. And that's what he says here, isn't it? The timing of this love? It was "at the right time" that Christ was sent to die for us. What does he mean here? Christians have often thought well, it may have something to do with... They used to say that it's actually a great deal when I was a youngster. "When the fullness of time had come God sent forth his Son". Christ came at the right time. The Roman civilization -- all the roads were in place. It was at last possible for the gospel to spread to the ends of the Roman Empire. And so in, in some sense, that was the right time. Paul always means more than that. He always means the right time in God's economy.

But here he adds something. Not just the right time in God's economy, in the fullness of time, at the end of the ages, when God had put everything in position to send his son to be our glorious Redeemer. But just at the right time for us when we were weak, when we had no strength, he came and he died. Just - at - the - right - time.

Ever happened to you? Somebody said to you, you have just come in the nick of time. Just at the right time. Isn't that wonderful. The right time for God to send his son, interestingly, was precisely when the world wasn't ready. Was it? He came to His own, and his own received him not. The right time was when we weren't ready. When we weren't strong. When we were ungodly. That's the right time. Because no other time would have been any use to us. If God had said, I'm going to send my Son for them. I'm going to send my Son when they have all perfectly obeyed me for 18 months. The time would never have come, you can reduce that time right down to a minute, can't you? That never would have been a time.

So, Paul is speaking here about the objects of God's love. It was when we were weak. Now, notice, again, I can't emphasize this enough. It's not when I am filled with a sense of God's love for me that God loved me. That's not the measure of His love. The measure of his love is what he did for me. When I had no sense of His love. And when I had no strength to come to Him.

And that's the third thing isn't that the objects or the week? The time is right. And the measure is this. Not just that when we were weak, but when we were ungodly -- Christ died for us. I don't know when I first noticed this, but ever since I noticed it, I wished somebody who translated the New Testament would try and express. This bring out Paul's emphasis. Because he does something very interesting here. He gives us a series of statements, and each of them ends with exactly the same verb. Now, you know that when Paul does that, when there's that kind of repetition, it's saying something. Paul didn't have a red pen. He didn't have he didn't have an italics in his computer to say, let me put this in italic so

that people will see it. I can't highlight it. He didn't even have highlighters. All he had was words. And here's how he puts it, verse six, "For Christ when we were still weak at the right time for the ungodly. He died." Verse seven, "Hardly on behalf of a righteous man would anyone die". Again in verse seven, "For a good man, someone might dare to die." Verse 8, "God proved his love. When we were still sinners for us Christ died." Died, died, died died! You see what he's saying? He's saying if you're going to test the measure of God's love -- Yes, his life was wonderful, our Blessed Lord Jesus Christ, but don't the gospels focus so dominantly on the last week of his life, and even more predominantly on his death? That's why they're not biographies, in the ordinary sense. Be a rare biography that gave 30 to 40% of the space to the final week of the person's life. And a good chunk of that to the last 24 hours. This isn't a biography. The gospels are theology. Christology. They're saying something to us. They're saying at the end of the day, he came into the world to live in order to die for the ungodly.

If you've been here over these weeks and months, just concentrate on that word ungodly. Pretend I'm the optometrist. Now focus your eye on the word ungodly. Here's the question. Where in Romans have you seen that word before? This is very interesting actually, this, this passage is the first time in Romans -- have you noticed -- the first time Paul has ever referred to the love of God. He's made no reference to the love of God in His exposition, really, has he until now? And this love is the love that sent Jesus Christ to die for the ungodly.

Now we remember the ungodly, we met them in chapter one, didn't we? The wrath of God is revealed from heaven, against whom? Against the ungodly. Against the ungodly. It is the ungodly, who are under God's judgment. Who experience even in this world the manifestations of His wrath. And you'll notice that almost all the manifestations of God's wrath in Romans 1:18 following, are happening here and now. They're not kept, as it were, for some future date. There are all kinds of signs here and now of us living under the judgment and the wrath of God. And His rejection. Now, listen to this. Since the fall of Adam, apart from our Lord Jesus Christ, God has shown his love only to those who are under his wrath. Because we're all under his wrath. It's breathtaking isn't it? But the ones God has loved are the ungodly who deserve only His wrath. And Jesus Christ has come, this is what Paul is saying, Jesus Christ has come for the ungodly, to die. "Died he, for me, who caused his pain? For me, to him who to death pursued. Amazing love. How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?" When we were weak, when we were ungodly.

Do remember a man in the gospel story who very evidently was both of these things. He was apparently the man nearest to Jesus during the hours of his crucifixion. He was there hanging on the cross, for the simple reason he was manifestly ungodly. And he was utterly helpless to save himself. He turned his dying body to the Lord Jesus Christ, and he said, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom". Jesus said to him, "My son, your sins are forgiven. This day you will be with Me in Paradise." The dying thief rejoiced to see this fountain in his day. And there have I as vial as he, washed all my sins away". Now that's the gospel. And it's good news. In a world like this, it's the good news that changes life in time and life in eternity.

I was going to quote a theologian to you. I mentioned them but not by name this morning. But we don't need theologians to tell us what this means. The Spirit tells us. My poor, bruised, weak, paralyzed one -- Your sins are forgiven.

So what do you do next? After we've sung, after the benediction? You get up and you walk out, and your live for His glory. That's grace.

## CLOSING PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank You for this marvelous grace that covers all our sins, and for your amazing love to us in Jesus Christ. And for the privilege of knowing in the safety of this room, that we are surrounded by men and women and boys and girls, who have tasted the same grace and know, these same realities. And we pray as we grasp more and more of the extent of your love for us, as we continue to study in this passage, that by that same grace, we may sense more and more what it means that your love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has given to us. And we pray this in Jesus, our Saviors name. Amen.