

Christ Died for Us Sinners

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Epistle reading, Paul's letter to the Romans. **God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** Here ends our text.

Just whom would you die for? When you think about it, there's probably quite a few people whom you would give up your life for. Your husband or wife, your mom or dad, your child, your brother or sister. If any of these people were about to die, you might step in and say, "I'll give them my vital organ. I'll be the hostage in their place. Take me as ransom instead." Or without any thinking, you might push them out of the way of a speeding car and get hit yourself. You jump in front of the terrorist's bullet. You die so that they might live. Why would you do this? Because they love you and you love them. It's more than just a romantic love or a brotherly love though. It's a deep and self-sacrificing love. You love them so much that you're willing to die so they could live.

But what if it were someone else? A neighbor, a co-worker, a boss or employee, or just an acquaintance. Well, you might have to think about that. You have a personal relationship with them, but just how well do you know them? They're good people. You like them, but you don't really love them, and they don't necessarily love you. Would you die for them? Would you really terminate your life, lose all your other close relationships, and give up all you have so this person, a nominal friend could live? Maybe there's someone else who could step forward on their behalf. Someone closer. After all you've got yourself and your own to think about. Would you die for them? Maybe, but probably not.

How about a complete stranger, someone you don't know at all? Would you die for them? I don't think so. People you don't know die every day. The newspapers are full of their obituaries. No disrespect, but why would you die for a stranger?

Now there are some folks who do die for others who aren't close family members. They often do it in the line of duty. A policeman or fireman puts himself in harm's way to save a citizen. Though it's not their intention to die for that person, it sometimes happens as part of the hazards of the job. The same with soldiers who die defending their country. They die for people they've never met in their line of duty. There are also military heroes like the serviceman who dies with honor by throwing himself on a grenade to save his platoon. He knowingly gives up his life to save his comrades whom he often loves as his own brothers.

But what about an enemy? Would a police officer die for a criminal holding a hostage at gunpoint? No. As part of his duty, he'd shoot him. Would a soldier die for the enemy who's firing bullets and bombs at him? No. As part of his duty, he'd fire back. They'd both kill the enemy. How about you? Would you die for the thief who threatened you or your family at gunpoint? Would you die for the terrorist who hated your country and took civilian lives? Would you die for the convicted murderer and take his execution so that he could live? I think not. Instead, you'd be saying, "Somebody get that guy. He deserves to die. Justice must be done." No. No one would ever die for an enemy.

But God did. God the Father sent his own Son to die for the sins of the world. Jesus was flogged, crucified, and killed by his enemies. And yet Jesus died even for his enemies. Jesus died for the betrayer Judas who handed him over to the Jewish Council for trial. Jesus died for his disciple Peter who denied him. Jesus died for the chief priests and Pharisees who wrongly convicted him and handed him over to the Romans for capital punishment. Jesus died for Pontius Pilate who shirked his duty and handed him over to the Roman soldiers for execution. Jesus died for those same soldiers who crucified him in their line of duty. Jesus died for the terrorist and murderer Barabbas so that he could go free. Jesus died for the two thieves who were crucified beside him. Jesus died for his enemies so that they might live, not just in this life but for eternity. Jesus died even for you.

Now you might think, "Of course that makes sense that Jesus died for me. If he died for his enemies, he'd certainly die for me since I'm a pretty good person. Some might even say a righteous person." But that's not the case. Jesus said, "No one is good but God alone." The apostle Paul reminds the church at Rome in this same letter, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." And that includes you and me. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God. They were holy and righteous doing God's will. But ever since their fall into sin, their offspring were born in the image of sinful man. We came out of the womb as ungodly heathens. We

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may not have been in the garden to betray Jesus, or at his trial crying, “Crucify him,” or at the cross hammering the nails into his hands and mocking him. But our sin was the cause of Christ’s death. We weren’t just naïve and passive bystanders, though. We rebelled against God and broke all his Commandments in thought, word, and deed. We were ungodly sinners. We opposed his will, struggled against his desires, and retaliated against his Law. We were combative, angry, and hostile to God. And all the time the devil was accusing us, “Somebody get that guy. He deserves to die. Justice must be done.” We were God’s enemies, deserving death. And yet Jesus still died for us that we might live.

Our Epistle reading tells us, “While we were still powerless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” We might only die for a close family member, someone who loved us, or maybe for a good and righteous person. But Christ died for the ungodly, the unrighteous, those who were strangers to God, those who were his enemies. Christ died for you. He gave up his vital organs, his own flesh and blood for you. He took your place as sin’s hostage and paid the ransom for you. He stepped in front of the lash, the cross, and the piecing spear for you. Why did Jesus die for you? Was he just doing his duty for someone he didn’t know? Was he just dying with honor for a good cause? No. God did this out of his great love for you. Not a romantic love or a brotherly love, but a godly love – a love that loves unconditionally and sacrificially, without having received love in return – a love that can love even one’s enemies.

But now that we are justified by Christ’s death and declared righteous by God through Christ’s resurrection, we’re no longer God’s enemies, but his friends. We’re his children whom he loves as our Father. We’re brothers with Jesus Christ and members of God’s family. How much more, having gone from God’s enemies to his friends, are we saved from the wrath of God. How much more does God love us as his dear children now that Jesus has risen from the dead and reconciled us to God. Our Epistle reading tells us, “Since we have now been justified by [Christ’s] blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 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.”

Jesus died for the whole world, even his enemies, even sinners like us. This is the sweet message of the Gospel. This is what we call universal justification. Jesus died for all. But this Gospel message is received only through faith in Christ – faith which the Holy Spirit gives through the Word of the Gospel and his Sacraments. This is what we call individual or personal justification. Jesus justified the whole world at the cross, but that justification comes to you in the here and now when you believe it – when the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in your heart. Our Epistles reading says, “Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Unfortunately though, many reject the word of the Gospel and battle against the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus died for the Pharisees, but they hardened their hearts and continued to reject him as God and Savior. Jesus died for the two thieves on the cross, but one doubted and continued to mock him. Jesus died for Judas, but he doubted Christ’s forgiveness and died in despair. Though Jesus died for them, they remained unjustified by their unbelief. They perished.

But the Pharisee Nicodemus believed in Christ and helped take his body from the cross. The one thief repented and believed in Christ and joined him in paradise that very day. The disciple Peter who had denied Jesus, believed in Christ and received his forgiveness. They were justified by faith. They live forever.

Universal and personal justification. “God so love the world that he gave his one and only Son.” That’s universal justification – Jesus died for all. “that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” That’s personal justification by faith. In the words of our Epistle reading, “Justified by his blood” – universal justification – and “justified by faith” – personal justification.

So whom would you die for? Would you die for a family member, a neighbor, a stranger, another citizen, an enemy? I don’t know. Perhaps we’ll never know until the opportunity presents itself. But I do know this, that Christ died for us sinners. Christ died for you. And justified by faith in his death and resurrection for us, we now live for him. “More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.