

The Cross of Christ, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: The Heart of God: Why the Cross?

Romans 5:6–11

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This opening lesson sets the foundation for the entire study, and the doctrine at stake is the very motive of the atonement: the love of God. Romans 5:6–11 will not let us treat the cross as a cold transaction or a mere legal mechanism. Paul piles up words for our condition (weak, ungodly, sinners, enemies) precisely so that the love which moved God toward us will shine all the brighter. Make sure the class hears that the cross does not create God's love; it reveals and proves it. The Father was not an angry deity who had to be persuaded by a kinder Son. The Father and the Son act together in one saving purpose, and the death of Christ is the demonstration of a love that was already in the heart of God toward us.

Two doctrinal guardrails belong in your mind as you teach. First, keep the love of God and the wrath of God together, not in tension but in harmony. Verse 9 plainly says we are “saved by him from the wrath of God.” The cross is loving precisely because it rescues us from a real and righteous judgment we could not escape on our own. Do not soften the wrath in the name of the love, or the love loses its weight. Second, this love is for sinners as sinners. Christ died for the ungodly, which means no one is too far gone and no one is good enough to need it less. Hold these truths gently before people who may secretly believe God could never love them, and before people who quietly believe they have earned his favor.

At the same time, this passage was never meant only to be analyzed. It was written to make hearts rejoice. The aim this week is not merely that students understand the motive of the cross but that they feel themselves loved by the God who proved it at Calvary. Many in your class carry a picture of a God who is disappointed in them, who helps them out of obligation. The formational target is to replace that picture with the face of the One who moved toward us at our worst. Send them home not only knowing that God loves them, but resting in it, and beginning to love him back.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says that “while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (v. 6). What does it tell us about the heart of God that he acted for us before we did anything to deserve it, and why does Paul stress the timing of the cross?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start with Paul's careful timing, because the gospel is hidden in it. "While we were still weak" means at the point of our complete inability, when we had nothing to offer and no power to save ourselves. The phrase "at the right time" points to God's sovereign initiative; the cross was not an accident or an afterthought but the planned movement of God toward helpless people. Christ died for the "ungodly," a strong word that names us not merely as imperfect but as those who had lived without regard for God.

The whole logic of grace stands or falls here. If Christ died for us while we were ungodly, then our acceptance never rested on our goodness in the first place, and it cannot be forfeited by the discovery of our badness. Help the class feel how freeing this is. The God of the Bible does not love us because we are lovely; he makes us lovely because he loves us. The initiative is entirely his.

Connect this to the rest of Scripture so the class sees a consistent God. This is the same heart that called Abram before he had done anything, that chose Israel not because they were great but because the Lord loved them, that sought Adam in the garden after the fall. The cross is the climax of a long story in which God always moves first.

Press the question Paul raises by his timing: if God acted for us at our worst, on what basis could we ever think we must clean ourselves up before coming to him? The order of the gospel is not clean yourself up and then come, but come and be cleansed. That order will matter in every lesson that follows.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The love of God as the motive of the atonement (Romans 5:8; John 3:16; 1 John 4:9–10)
- Grace as God's initiative toward the helpless and undeserving, not a reward for human goodness
- The universal scope of the need: all were "ungodly" and "weak," none able to save themselves (Romans 3:23)
- The deliberate, planned nature of the cross, accomplished "at the right time" in God's purpose
- Salvation grounded in who God is and what he has done, not in human merit (Ephesians 2:8–9)

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it good news that Christ died for us while we were "ungodly" rather than after we improved?
- How does the timing of the cross expose the lie that we must earn our way to God before we approach him?
- Where do you see people today trying to make themselves acceptable before coming to God, and how does this verse free them?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think about the times you most want to hide from God, the moments after you have failed or sinned. How does it change your instinct to run away when you realize that Christ died for you precisely while you were “still a sinner” (v. 8)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first of the self-examining questions, and its aim is honesty rather than information. Most of us have an instinct, as old as Adam hiding in the garden, to run from God after we fail. We assume distance is what sin requires of us. Paul says the opposite: it was “while we were still sinners” that Christ died for us, which means our sin is the very thing his love came to address.

Help students see the difference between hiding and drawing near. Guilt tells us to keep our distance until we feel worthy again, but that worthiness never quite arrives, and so we drift. The gospel tells us to bring our failure straight to the One who died for it. The cross does not excuse sin; it covers it, and it invites the sinner home.

Move the conversation toward concrete change. Ask what it would look like, the next time a student fails, to turn toward God rather than away. The mark of growing faith is not that we sin less in our own strength, but that we run to grace more quickly. Encourage them to make the cross, not their mood, the reason they come.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Repentance as turning toward God in trust, not hiding from him in shame (Acts 3:19)
- The lie that God’s acceptance depends on our feeling worthy on a given day
- Assurance grounded in Christ’s finished work rather than in our spiritual performance
- The difference between godly sorrow that draws us to God and worldly shame that drives us away (2 Corinthians 7:10)

Discussion Prompts

- What is your honest first instinct after you sin, to hide from God or to come to him? Why?
- How would believing that Christ died for you “while you were still a sinner” change that instinct?
- What is one practical way to turn toward God this week in a moment you would normally avoid him?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verses 7 and 8 Paul contrasts the rare person who might die for a good man with God, who “shows his love” by Christ dying for sinners. How does the cross reveal a love that goes beyond anything we see in ordinary human sacrifice, and what does the word “shows” tell us about why God did it this way?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul sets up a deliberate contrast to make the love of God stand out. Among people, he says, someone might rarely dare to die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a truly good person one might find the courage. Human sacrifice, even at its noblest, is reserved for the worthy. We give our lives for those we admire, for causes we believe in, for people who would do the same for us.

Then comes the hinge of the passage: “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God reverses the human pattern entirely. He gives his greatest gift not to the deserving but to the undeserving, not to friends but to rebels. The word “shows” is important; it means to demonstrate, to put on display. The cross is God’s public, unmistakable demonstration of a love the world had never imagined.

Help the class feel the scandal and the comfort of this at once. The scandal is that we are the sinners in the sentence; there is no flattering way to read it. The comfort is that being a sinner is no barrier to this love, because sinners are exactly whom it was for. Most human love is responsive, drawn out by something attractive in the beloved. God’s love is creative; it sets its affection on the unlovely and makes them his own.

Tie this to the heart of the whole study. Every facet of the cross we will examine (redemption, propitiation, reconciliation, justification) flows from this demonstrated love. If the class grasps nothing else this week, let them grasp that the cross is the place where God proved, beyond all doubt, how he feels about them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cross as the supreme demonstration and proof of God’s love (Romans 5:8)
- The contrast between human love (drawn to the worthy) and divine love (given to the unworthy)
- God’s love as initiating and creative rather than merely responsive
- The unity of the Father and the Son in the saving work of the cross, against any idea of a reluctant Father
- Love and holiness held together: God demonstrates love precisely by dealing with sin

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between loving someone because they are good and loving someone to make them good?

- Why does Paul go out of his way to call us “sinners” in the very verse that proclaims God’s love?
- How does it change your week to know the cross was God’s deliberate demonstration of love for you?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where in your life have you been quietly trying to earn God’s love, to make yourself acceptable before you come to him? What would it look like this week to let the cross, rather than your performance, be the proof that God loves you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the truth of God’s initiating love into the daily reality of performance and striving. Many sincere believers live as though the cross got them in the door, but their ongoing standing with God now depends on keeping their spiritual scorecard high enough. The result is a restless, anxious faith that never quite feels secure.

Help students name the specific forms this takes: measuring their worth by how their quiet time went, assuming God is pleased on good days and displeased on bad ones, treating obedience as a way to buy God’s affection rather than a response to it. The passage cuts the root of all of this by locating God’s love before any of our performance.

Be careful and balanced here, because this is a church that rightly takes obedience seriously. The point is not that obedience does not matter; later lessons will show that faith without obedience is dead. The point is the order and the motive. We obey because we are loved, not in order to be loved. Grace is the foundation, and faithful living is the grateful response built upon it.

Aim at a concrete shift. Invite each student to identify one arena where they are performing for God’s love and to practice, this week, receiving that love as already given in Christ. The healthiest obedience grows in soil that is already sure of God’s welcome.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The proper order of grace and obedience: we obey because we are loved, not to earn love
- Assurance rooted in Christ’s work rather than in fluctuating personal performance
- The danger of a merit-based, anxious religion that never rests in God’s welcome
- Faithful obedience as the grateful response to grace, not the price of it (Titus 2:11–14)

Discussion Prompts

- In what area of life are you most tempted to perform for God’s approval rather than rest in it?

- How can we take obedience seriously without turning it into a way of earning God's love?
- What would change in your week if you began each day sure that God already loves you in Christ?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says we have "now been justified by his blood" and will be "saved by him from the wrath of God" (v. 9). Why does Paul ground both our present standing and our future hope in the blood of Christ rather than in our own goodness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here Paul moves from the motive of the cross to its effect, and he uses two key words: "justified by his blood" and "saved from the wrath of God." Both our present standing and our future hope are anchored in the same place, the blood of Christ. To be justified is to be declared right with God, acquitted and accepted, not on the basis of our record but on the basis of Christ's sacrifice.

Notice the phrase "by his blood." Paul does not say we are justified by our sincerity, our resolutions, or our religious effort, but by the life poured out in death on our behalf. The blood of Christ is the costly price that secures our acquittal. This sets up the doctrines of redemption and propitiation that later lessons will unfold; here it is enough to see that our right standing cost the lifeblood of the Son of God.

Take the wrath of God seriously rather than explaining it away. Wrath is not divine bad temper; it is the settled, righteous response of a holy God to sin. The good news is not that there is no wrath, but that Christ has borne it for us, so that those who are in him are saved from it. A love that rescues us from real danger is greater, not lesser, than a love that pretends there was never any danger at all.

Help the class hold present and future together. Because we have already been justified by his blood, we can face the day of judgment without dread. The verdict that matters most has already been spoken over those who are in Christ. This is the ground of a settled, hopeful confidence that the rest of the study will keep building on.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Justification as God's declaration that the believer is right with him, grounded in the blood of Christ (Romans 5:9)
- The blood of Christ as the costly basis of our acceptance, not human effort
- The reality of God's wrath against sin as righteous, not arbitrary (Romans 1:18)
- Salvation as rescue from a genuine judgment, accomplished by Christ on our behalf
- Present standing and future hope both secured in the same finished work

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul anchor both our present standing and our future hope in the blood of Christ?
- How does taking God's wrath seriously actually make his love appear greater rather than smaller?
- What difference does it make to know the verdict over you is already settled in Christ?

Question 6

Student Question:

When you imagine standing before God one day, do you expect to meet wrath or welcome? Name the specific fear or guilt you carry, and consider how the promise that we are "saved by him from the wrath of God" speaks to it.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question invites students to bring their specific fears and guilt into the light of the promise that we are "saved by him from the wrath of God." Many believers live with a low background hum of dread, a sense that one day the bill will come due and God will finally hold their failures against them. Paul speaks directly to that fear.

Encourage honesty about what each person actually expects when they imagine standing before God. Some expect a frown, a list, a cold recital of everything they got wrong. The gospel does not deny that we have a history of sin; it announces that the history has been dealt with in Christ. The one who saved us from wrath will not greet us with it.

Be a careful pastor here. For the genuinely fearful believer, the word is comfort: the wrath has been borne, draw near. But guard against turning this into presumption; later lessons will make clear that this confidence belongs to those who are in Christ and remain faithful. The aim is neither dread nor presumption, but the settled assurance of a child who knows the Father is for them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Assurance of salvation grounded in Christ's work, not in our feelings or fears
- The believer's freedom from condemnation in Christ (Romans 8:1)
- Confidence before the day of judgment as the fruit of justification (1 John 4:17)
- The difference between healthy reverence for God and crippling dread of him

Discussion Prompts

- When you imagine meeting God, do you expect wrath or welcome, and why?
- What specific guilt or fear do you most need this promise to speak to this week?
- How can we hold genuine reverence for God together with confident assurance in Christ?

Question 7

Student Question:

In verses 10 and 11 Paul says we were “enemies” who have been “reconciled to God” through the death of his Son. What does it mean that the cross deals not just with our guilt but with our broken relationship with God, turning enemies into friends?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul now adds a relational word that deepens everything: we were “enemies,” and we have been “reconciled to God” through the death of his Son. Sin is not only a legal problem of guilt; it is a relational rupture, a state of hostility between us and God. The cross does not merely clear a record; it heals a relationship and ends a war.

Make sure the class feels the weight of the word “enemies.” It describes our side of the breach especially, our rebellion, our turning away. Yet the remarkable thing is who makes the first move toward peace. We did not sue for terms; God did. While we were still enemies, the reconciliation was accomplished by his initiative at the cross. The offended party paid the price to win back the offenders.

This is the doctrine of reconciliation in seed form, which Lesson 7 will open more fully. For now, help students see that the goal of the cross is not merely acquittal but relationship. God is not content to declare us not guilty and leave us at arm’s length; he brings us near, turns enemies into friends, and finally into children. The end of the atonement is fellowship with God himself.

Let this land personally. The God against whom we sinned is the same God who crossed every distance to bring us home. That truth should reshape both our peace with God and the way we handle our own broken relationships, which the next question will press.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reconciliation as the healing of a broken relationship, not merely a legal acquittal (Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18–19)
- Sin as personal hostility toward God, and the cross as the end of that hostility
- God as the offended party who nonetheless takes the initiative to make peace
- The goal of the atonement as restored fellowship with God, leading to adoption as his children

Discussion Prompts

- What does it add to your understanding of the cross to know it makes enemies into friends?
- Why is it significant that God, the offended party, made the first move toward peace?
- How does being reconciled to God change the way you relate to God day by day?

Question 8

Student Question:

Are there relationships in your own life marked by distance, resentment, or a refusal to make the first move? How does the God who reconciled his enemies “while we were enemies” challenge the way you handle being wronged?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes the vertical reality of reconciliation with God and turns it toward our horizontal relationships. The same God who reconciled his enemies calls his reconciled people to be peacemakers. Jesus will later teach that those who have been forgiven much are to forgive, and that we cannot hold God’s mercy in one hand and a grudge in the other.

Invite students to name, at least privately, the relationships marked by distance and resentment, the places where they are waiting for the other person to make the first move. The pattern of the cross is that the offended party moves first. That is a costly and countercultural pattern, and it is exactly the one we have received.

Be wise and gentle here, especially where there has been real harm. Reconciliation does not mean pretending nothing happened or returning to unsafe situations. It means refusing to nurse hostility, being willing to forgive as we have been forgiven, and taking the initiative toward peace as far as it depends on us (Romans 12:18). The cross gives us both the model and the power for this.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to be peacemakers as those who have been reconciled (Matthew 5:9; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20)
- Forgiving others in light of having been forgiven much (Matthew 18:21–35; Ephesians 4:32)
- Taking initiative toward peace as the pattern of the cross
- The difference between biblical forgiveness and pretending no wrong occurred

Discussion Prompts

- Where in your life are you waiting for the other person to make the first move?
- How does the pattern of the cross, the offended party moving first, challenge that?
- What is one step toward peace you could take this week as far as it depends on you?

Question 9**Student Question:**

Paul moves from “justified” to “saved” to “reconciled” and finally says we now “rejoice in God” (v. 11). Trace how this passage roots our salvation entirely in what God has done in Christ, not in human merit, and explain why this leaves no room for boasting in ourselves or for despairing of God’s welcome. How does this guard us against both pride and hopelessness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it asks students to trace the whole movement of the passage and see that salvation rests entirely on God's work in Christ. Paul stacks the verbs deliberately: we have been justified (v. 9), we will be saved (v. 9, 10), we have been reconciled (v. 10), and now we rejoice in God (v. 11). Every one of these is something God does and we receive; not one is something we achieve.

Press the implication for human boasting. If our justification is by his blood, our reconciliation through his Son, and our future salvation by his life, then there is no room left to boast in ourselves. Paul makes this explicit elsewhere: salvation is by grace, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). At the same time, this church rightly insists that grace is not received passively. The same God who saves by grace calls us to respond in an obedient faith, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4). Grace and obedient faith are not rivals; obedience is the appointed way we lay hold of the grace freely given.

Guard the class against two opposite errors at once, because this verse closes the door on both. Against pride, it says we contributed nothing to earn this love; we were weak, ungodly, sinners, enemies. Against despair, it says this love is exactly for such people, so no one is beyond its reach. The proud must come down to grace, and the despairing must come up to grace, and both arrive at the same cross.

Make clear, against the doctrine of salvation by faith only, that the faith which saves is a living, obedient faith, never a bare mental assent. And against the doctrine that the saved can never fall, note that Paul writes to people he will later warn to continue in God's kindness (Romans 11:22). The confidence of this passage is real, but it is the confidence of those who remain in Christ by faith, not a guarantee detached from a faithful life.

Finally, land on the last verb: we "rejoice in God." The goal of all this doctrine is not cold certainty but warm joy. The proper response to being loved like this is not pride and not anxiety, but worship.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation as entirely the work of God received by an obedient faith, leaving no room for human boasting (Ephesians 2:8-9)
- The faith that saves as a living, obedient faith expressed in repentance, confession, and baptism, not "faith only" (Acts 2:38; James 2:24)
- The exclusion of both pride (we earned nothing) and despair (this love is for sinners)
- Assurance as belonging to those who remain in Christ by faith, not an unconditional guarantee (Romans 11:22; Hebrews 3:14)
- Joy in God himself as the goal of salvation, not merely escape from punishment (Romans 5:11)

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage leave no room for boasting in ourselves?
- Why is it important that the faith which saves is an obedient, living faith rather than mere assent?
- How does the cross address both the proud person and the despairing person at the same time?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across Romans 5:6–11 as a whole: weak, ungodly, sinners, enemies, and yet loved, justified, reconciled, rejoicing. Name one specific way the heart of God revealed here is reshaping how you see yourself, and one concrete step you will take this week to live as someone truly loved by God.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the whole lesson and asks for a personal response. Have students look back across the chain of words Paul uses for our condition (weak, ungodly, sinners, enemies) and the chain of words for God's work (loved, justified, reconciled, rejoicing). The movement from the first list to the second is the movement of the gospel, and it is meant to land in a changed life.

Resist letting this stay abstract. Ask each person to name one specific way the heart of God revealed in this passage is reshaping how they see themselves. For one it may be the end of trying to earn love; for another, the courage to stop hiding; for another, a relationship they need to move toward in peace.

Then ask for one concrete step. Spiritual formation happens in specifics. The aim of this opening lesson is not merely that students admire the love of God from a distance, but that they begin to live as people who are genuinely, securely loved, and who are learning to love God back. Close by reminding them that everything else in this study (redemption, propitiation, reconciliation, the table, the cross we take up) grows out of this one root: God so loved.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The transforming power of grasping the love of God personally, not merely intellectually
- Christian identity rooted in being loved by God in Christ (1 John 3:1)
- Spiritual formation as the lifelong response of gratitude to the cross
- Joy and assurance as the proper fruit of dwelling on the heart of God

Discussion Prompts

- Which word in this passage describes you most, and which word describes God's answer to it?
- What is one way the love of God here is changing how you see yourself?
- What single concrete step will you take this week to live as someone truly loved by God?