UNASHAMED: A STUDY OF ROMANS

Civil War

ROMANS 7:14–23 · PASTOR BRIAN CARROLL · NOVEMBER 15, 2026

Walker County still remembers the war that turned neighbor against neighbor and brother against brother, but the fiercest civil war is the one fought inside every follower of Christ. In Romans 7, Paul admits what most of us only feel: he delights in God's law, yet another law in his members keeps waging war against it. It's an honest look at the battle within, and at why we will never win it in our own strength.

CHATTANOOGA VALLEY BAPTIST CHURCH

Introduction

- Several years ago we went on a summer mission trip to Williamsburg, Kentucky.
  - We had partnered with a local Baptist Association and worked on various projects during the week.
  - Each evening, we hosted VBS at this little church that was way out in the country.
  - It was one of those churches that had more members in the cemetery than they had in the pew.
  - You could actually fit about 20 of their church buildings inside the footprint of their cemetery.
  - You literally could step out of their front door and walk right into the cemetery!
    - There was a kind of morbid humor to it.
    - There's a huge emphasis in the world of church growth on creating an inviting first impression for guests.
    - I'm not sure how you can improve your curb appeal when your front yard is nothing but grave markers.
    - For this church, however, the cemetery was a source of pride.
    - The pastor could tell stories about many of the people who were buried in this massive cemetery.
  - One of the things that was most intriguing is that the church cemetery had both Confederate and Union soldiers buried in it.
    - In our area, particularly in older cemeteries, you can frequently find Confederate troops buried in them.
    - We've got at least seven Confederate soldiers buried in our cemetery.
    - It is rare to find Union and Confederate soldiers in the same cemetery.
  - However, in Kentucky, it was very common for men in the same community to choose very different pathways.
- One of the most famous families in Kentucky was the Crittenden family.
  - John J. Crittenden was a United States Senator and later the governor of Kentucky.
  - In December of 1860, as the nation was coming apart, he proposed what became known as the Crittenden Compromise.
  - It was a last-ditch effort to hold the Union together.

    - Obviously, it failed.
- And within a few months, the war that divided the nation came home and divided his family.
    - John Crittenden had two sons who were career soldiers.
    - His oldest, George, joined the Confederacy and became a general.
    - His younger son, Thomas, stayed with the Union and became a general too.
    - Same father.
    - Same home.
    - Same Kentucky soil.
    - Two different uniforms.
- And Thomas Crittenden didn't stay in Kentucky.
    - In September of 1863, he marched into our backyard.
    - He commanded one of the three Union corps at the Battle of Chickamauga.
    - If you've ever driven through Chickamauga, you've probably been on the road that bears his name: Crittenden Avenue.
    - There's even a historical marker in his honor.
    - And right there on that marker, it tells you that this Union general was the brother of a Confederate general.
- That's what a civil war does.
    - It doesn't just divide a nation.
    - It divides families.
    - It turns brother against brother.
- But this morning, Paul is going to describe a civil war that's even more personal than that.
    - It's not brother against brother.
    - It's me against me.
    - It's a war that every follower of Christ knows by experience.
    - You want to do what is right, but you find yourself doing the very thing you hate.
- Let's turn our attention to the next few verses in Romans 7 as we consider that great struggle within:

Scripture Reading

Romans 7:14–23 ESV

> 14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.
> 15 For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.
> 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.
> 17 So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.
> 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.
> 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.
> 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.
> 21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.
> 22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being,
> 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

- In Romans 7, the Apostle Paul gives us four principles to help us better understand our relationship to the law.
- The first principle is this: “Through our identification with Christ’s death, we have been released from our old binding relationship to the law.”
    - The law didn’t die.
    - It’s still holy, righteous, and good.
    - But we died to it in Christ.
    - The law’s demands are still being sent, but they can’t be delivered.
    - The addressee is deceased.
    - And now we belong to someone else, to Jesus, who was raised from the dead.
    - That doesn’t mean we get to run wild.
    - It means we don’t live to check boxes anymore.
    - We live to please Him.
- Last week, we saw the second principle: God’s law is good.
    - Sin is so corrupt that it takes even God’s good commandment and uses it to stir up rebellion and bring death.

    - The law didn't create our sin.
    - It exposed it.
    - Just like polarized sunglasses cut the glare off the water and show you what's beneath the surface, the law shows us what is already at work in our souls.
    - And it shows us that our sin is "sinful beyond measure."
- This morning, Paul gets even more personal.
    - He moves from the past tense to the present tense.
        - Paul has shifted from talking about what sin did in his life to what sin is doing in his life.
        - And there's something important about the man who's speaking.
        - This is a man who hates his sin and delights in God's law.
        - Those aren't the affections of a man who is comfortable living in rebellion against God.
        - Those are the affections of a man whose heart has been changed by Jesus Christ.
    - And he shows us what it looks like when a follower of Christ tries to win this war in his own strength.
    - Which leads to the third principle: "Even a follower of Christ who delights in God's law will lose the war against sin every time he fights it in his own strength."
- I would imagine that everyone in the room has had some experience with that.
    - The good news is that you're not alone.
    - Look around. You're in good company.
    - And you're in good company with the Apostle Paul, who is honest about his own struggle.
- Remember Thomas Crittenden?
    - Before the Battle of Chickamauga, his corps came through this area, and he needed a headquarters.
    - He found one at Lee and Gordon's Mill.
    - Just days earlier, the mill had been the headquarters of Confederate General Braxton Bragg.
    - When Bragg moved out, Crittenden moved in.
- The mill was run by a man named James Lee.
    - It was his family's mill.

    - His father-in-law had built it.
    - But for ten days in September of 1863, it wasn't really his anymore.
    - Crittenden seized it, and he forced James Lee to grind corn for the Union army.
- Think about that.
    - James Lee still showed up at his own mill.
    - He still ran his own equipment.
    - He still did the work he knew how to do.
    - But someone else was giving the orders.
    - His mill was occupied.
- And that's exactly how Paul describes himself in verse 14.
  "I am of the flesh, sold under sin."
    - Paul belongs to Christ.
    - He delights in God's law.
    - But there's an occupying force living inside him.
    - And it keeps giving orders.
- Now remember what Paul has already told us in Romans 6. Sin is no longer our master.
    - Jesus Christ has broken its dominion over us.
    - But an enemy doesn't have to own the territory to keep fighting over it.
    - Sin has lost its rightful claim to the believer, but it hasn't stopped trying to exercise control.
- And that's the conflict Paul is describing.

Sin is an occupying force in the life of every believer. (vv. 14–17)

- Paul starts with something we all agree on.
    - "For we know that the law is spiritual."
    - In other words, the law comes from God.
    - It reflects God's character.
    - And it demands a holiness that reaches all the way down to the heart.
    - There's absolutely nothing wrong with the law.

- The problem is on the other side of the sentence.
  "But I am of the flesh, sold under sin."
  - That's a slave-market phrase.
  - It describes someone who has been sold and now belongs to someone else.
  - There's another man in Scripture who was described with the same language.
    - King Ahab wanted a vineyard that belonged to his neighbor, Naboth.
    - Naboth wouldn't sell it, because it was his family's inheritance.
    - So Ahab went home and sulked.
    - He lay on his bed, turned his face to the wall, and wouldn't eat.
    - His wife Jezebel arranged for Naboth to be falsely accused and stoned to death.
    - And Ahab went down to take possession of the vineyard.
    - That's where the prophet Elijah met him.

1 Kings 21:20 ESV

> 20 Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD."

    - Ahab sold himself.
    - Ahab was an evil man, and when he walked into that vineyard he was getting exactly what he wanted.
    - But Paul is describing something very different.
  - Now listen to Paul: "I am of the flesh, sold under sin."
    - Same language.
    - Very different man.
    - Ahab sold himself and enjoyed the deal.
    - Paul was sold, and he hates it.
    - "I do the very thing I hate."
  - That's the difference between someone who is enslaved to sin and happy about it, and someone who belongs to Christ and is grieved by what sin still does in him.
    - Ahab didn't fight.
    - Paul can't stop fighting.
    - And those two people are sitting in this room this morning.

        - There are some of you who are sold to sin and you're fine with it.
        - And the rest of you are following Christ and to some degree, you're still waging war with the sin that occupies you.
- And notice the tense.
    - Paul doesn't say, "I *was* of the flesh."
    - He says, "I *am*."
    - This is the Apostle Paul, years into following Jesus, and he says that sin still has a grip on him.
- Then he tells us what that feels like.
    - Verse 15: "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."
    - Have you ever said, "I don't know why I keep doing this"?
    - You promised yourself it wouldn't happen again.
    - You meant it.
    - And then it happened again.
    - That's not just you.
    - That's Paul.
- But look at verse 16.
    - "Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good."
    - Even Paul's failure is evidence of something.
    - If he didn't care about God's law, he wouldn't hate breaking it.
    - The fact that it bothers you is a sign that God is at work in you.
    - Someone with no new life doesn't lose sleep over sin.
- Then comes verse 17.
    - "It is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me."
    - That's the occupier.
    - Paul isn't passing the blame.
    - This isn't some kind of "The Devil made me do it" schtick.
- He's still the one doing it, and he knows it.
    - But he is telling us who's been giving the orders inside the mill.
    - There's a part of him, made new in Christ, that wants to obey God.

    - And there's an occupying force that's still living on the premises.
- Some of you have been told that a real Christian doesn't struggle like this.
    - That if you were really saved, it would be easy.
    - Paul would disagree.
    - Every believer still carries the flesh, and every believer has to fight it until the day we see Jesus.
    - The struggle doesn't mean you're not a Christian.
    - It may be one of the clearest signs that you are.

A house divided cannot win the war in its own strength. (vv. 18–20)

- In the summer of 1858, five years before the armies came through this community, Abraham Lincoln stood up in Springfield, Illinois, to accept his party's nomination for the United States Senate.
    - The country was tearing itself apart over slavery.
    - And Lincoln said this: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free."
    - Some of his own advisors thought he'd gone too far.
    - He lost that election.
    - But those words followed him all the way to the White House.
    - And Lincoln didn't come up with that line on his own.
      He borrowed it from Jesus.
- In Mark 3:25, Jesus said, "If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand."
    - Lincoln was describing a nation.
    - Paul is describing a man.
- And in verse 18, he tells us exactly where the dividing line runs.
    - "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out."
    - That's a house divided.
    - One part of Paul wants what God wants.

    - The other part won't let him get there.
- When you first read this passage, it's a challenging one to try to process.
    - If it feels like Paul is repeating himself, that's because he is.
    - Verses 18–20 restate 14–17 almost word for word, and both rounds end on "sin that dwells within me."
    - Repetition like that is deliberate.
    - That makes this passage *sound* like the struggle it is describing.
        - Look in the mirror for just a minute and ask yourself, "How often have I fought this battle?"
        - You think you have victory over sin and *then* you mess up again.
        - And the more you fight that battle, the more you grow weary.
        - And as you've fought that battle, how many times has the Enemy planted thoughts of doubt and disbelief in your mind?
        - As long as you keep fighting in your own strength, I've got really bad news for you - you're going to end up on that same battlefield losing the same battle.
        - If the same armies line up the same way and use the same strategies every time they face off, they're going to have the same outcomes.
- In December of 1862, the Union army tried to take the town of Fredericksburg, Virginia.
    - Above the town was a ridge called Marye's Heights.
    - At the bottom of that ridge was a sunken road, and along that road ran a stone wall.
    - Behind that wall were Confederate soldiers, many of them Georgians, with artillery on the hill above them.
    - And between the town and that wall was nothing but open ground.
    - The Union commander, General Ambrose Burnside, sent a brigade across that field.
        - It was cut to pieces.
        - So he sent another.
        - And another.
        - From late morning until after dark, wave after wave of Union soldiers marched across the same field toward the same wall.
        - Not one of them reached it.
    - By the end of the day, about 8,000 Union soldiers had fallen in front of that stone wall.
        - Those men weren't cowards.

        - They were some of the bravest soldiers who ever wore a uniform.
        - They didn't lose because they didn't try hard enough.
        - They lost because trying harder was the plan.
            - Same field.
            - Same wall.
            - Same result.
- That's what it looks like when a follower of Christ tries to win this war in his own strength.
    - You charge the wall again.
    - You promise yourself this time will be different.
    - You try harder.
- And verse 19 tells you exactly how it ends. "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."
    - Which leads us to the final point…

The battle lines run straight through the heart of every believer. (vv. 21–23)

- In verse 21, Paul steps back and tells us what he's learned from all of this.
    - "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand."
    - Paul uses the word "law" a lot in these verses, and it can get confusing.
        - In verse 21, "law" doesn't mean the Ten Commandments.
        - It means a principle, a pattern.
        - Something that happens every time, like the law of gravity.
    - Paul is saying, "Here's what I've found to be true: the moment I want to do right, evil is standing right there beside me."
- Then he describes the two armies.
    - On one side is verse 22: "For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being."
        - Don't skip past that word "delight."
        - Paul doesn't just put up with God's law.
        - He loves it. He's using the language of the psalmist.
        - Psalm 1 says the blessed man is the one whose "delight is in the law of the LORD."

        - A person without new life in Christ might respect God's law.
        - He might fear it.
        - He might ignore it.
        - But he doesn't delight in it.
        - That delight is evidence that God has done something new inside of you.
    - On the other side is verse 23: "But I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members."
        - "Members" is Paul's word for the parts of his body.
        - His eyes.
        - His hands.
        - His mouth.
        - His appetites.
    - So here are the two sides.
        - On one side is God's law, which Paul loves with his mind.
        - On the other side is the law of sin, which works through his body.
        - And Paul says those two sides are at war.
    - That's an easy picture to draw in your mind.
        - You see an army drawn up in battle formation, marching out against an enemy.
        - This isn't a skirmish fought between a handful of troops.
        - It's an all-out campaign.
    - And notice where the battle is being fought.
        - Not out there.
        - In here.
    - If you've ever walked the battlefield at Chickamauga, you've noticed that the fields carry the names of families.
        - Brotherton Field.
        - Kelly Field.
        - Viniard Field.
        - In some of those fields, you can still see the family cabins.
    - Those weren't battlefields when those families planted them.
        - They were farms and homes.

        - And then the armies came, and the battle lines ran right through their front yards.
        - That's what Paul is describing.
        - The battle lines don't run between you and somebody else.
        - They run straight through you.
    - So let me ask you: where does the line run in your life?
        - Maybe it's your tongue.
        - You love God's Word, and then you hear what comes out of your mouth when somebody cuts you off in traffic.
        - Maybe it's your temper with your kids.
        - Maybe it's what you look at on your phone when no one else is around.
        - Maybe it's the bitterness you've been carrying toward someone for years.
        - You know where your front line is.
    - And then Paul uses one more military word.
      "Making me captive."
        - That's the word for a prisoner of war.
        - In our war with sin, there are two kinds of captives: the willing and the unwilling.
    - Remember Ahab?
        - He was a willing captive.
        - He sold himself and enjoyed the deal.
    - Paul is an unwilling captive.
        - He hates those chains.
        - He fights against them.
        - And in his own strength, he cannot break them.
    - And here's the thing about a prisoner of war.
        - He can't free himself.
        - He can be brave.
        - He can be determined.
        - He can plan the perfect escape.
    - But if he's going to get out, somebody from outside the prison has to come and get him.

Conclusion

- So where does that leave us this morning?
  - Sin is an occupying force in the life of every believer.
  - A house divided cannot win the war in its own strength.
  - And the battle lines run straight through the heart of every one of us who follows Jesus.
- Back in 1858, Lincoln said a house divided wouldn't stay divided forever.
  - "It will become all one thing, or all the other."
  - Paul has been painfully honest with us this morning.
  - He's a man at war with himself.
  - And he's not winning.
  - He's a captive.
  - And a captive can't charge his way out of the prison camp.
- Next week, Paul is going to come to the end of himself.
  - He's going to ask one question that changes everything.
  - But I'm not going to send you home this morning without hope.
- Some of you heard Ahab's story this morning and recognized yourself.
  - You've made peace with the very sin that ought to trouble you.
  - You've sold yourself to sin, and you're fine with the deal.
  - Let me tell you as lovingly as I know how: that's the most dangerous place a person can be.
  - Sin isn't a harmless roommate.
  - It's an occupier, and it always ends in death.
- But Jesus came for captives.
  - He lived the life you couldn't live, He died on the cross for your sin, and He rose from the dead.
  - And He sets prisoners free.
- This morning you can turn from your sin and trust Him.
  - Some of you are following Jesus, and you're exhausted.
  - You've been charging that same stone wall for years.
  - You keep promising yourself that this time will be different.

    - Hear me: trying harder isn’t the answer.
    - Stop charging the wall.
    - Tell God the truth about the battle you’re losing, and stop trying to win it on your own.
        - The answer isn't to surrender to sin.
        - And the answer isn't to summon more strength from somewhere deep inside yourself.
    - The answer is to depend upon Jesus Christ.
        - He's already broken sin's dominion over you.
        - And the same grace that saved you is the grace that will sustain you in the battle.
        - You don't need a better strategy for fighting alone.
        - You need to stop fighting alone.
- Some of you have been wondering if you’re even saved, because the struggle is still there.
    - Remember what we saw in verse 16.
    - The fact that you hate your sin is evidence that God is at work in you.
    - Ahab lost sleep because he couldn't have what he wanted.
    - His problem wasn't that he hated his sin.
    - His problem was that he couldn't satisfy his sinful desires.
    - And that's a very different kind of struggle from the one Paul describes.
- And maybe the clearest evidence of what God has done in your heart is how you respond when sin raises its ugly head.
    - Do you welcome it?
    - Do you make excuses for it?
    - Have you made peace with it?
    - Or does it grieve you?
    - Do you hate what it does to your fellowship with God?
- If you're comfortable with your sin, you need to repent and turn to Jesus Christ.
    - And if you're exhausted from fighting it, you need to remember that the One who saved you is the One who will sustain you.
    - The battle is real.
    - But you were never meant to fight it alone.