UNASHAMED: A STUDY OF ROMANS

From Start to *Finish*

ROMANS 6:20–23 · PASTOR BRIAN CARROLL · OCTOBER 25, 2026

> *Paul ends chapter 6 with a powerful linear progression. He walks us from our death in sin to our ultimate glorification in Christ.*

Introduction

- If you've lived in the South for any length of time, you know what a Bradford Pear tree is.
  - Even if you don't know it by name, you know it.
  - It's the tree that shows up every spring, covered from top to bottom in white blossoms.
  - Lining shopping center parking lots.
  - Down the middle of subdivision entrances.
  - In front yards all over Northwest Georgia.
- For about two weeks every spring, it's the prettiest thing on the street.
  - And for a long time, everybody wanted one.
  - It grew fast. It was cheap.
  - It looked great almost immediately.
- Developers loved them.
  - Homeowners loved them.
  - Churches loved them.
  - In fact, we had some right here in the church's yard.
- So what's the problem?
  - Well, the first problem is that smell.
    - If you've ever walked under a Bradford pear in full bloom, you know exactly what I'm talking about.
    - And if you haven't, I'm not going to describe it from the pulpit.
    - Just know that nobody has ever planted one for the fragrance.
    - That fragrance is so bad, it attracts flies instead of bees.

- The second problem is how they grow.
  - They shoot up fast, but they aren't built to last.
  - Give them a few years and one good storm, and they split right down the middle.
  - If you've had one, then it's very likely you've had to get out your chainsaw after a storm.
- And then there's the fruit.
  - A Bradford pear doesn't give you pears anybody would eat.
  - It gives you hard little pears that are no good to anybody.
  - Except the birds. The birds eat them and carry the seeds everywhere.
- Which brings us to the biggest problem.
  - Those seeds have spread wild pear trees all over the Southeast.
  - They choke out native plants.
  - They take over fields and roadsides.
  - If you've driven down the interstate in the spring and seen whole hillsides covered in white, a lot of that is the offspring of a tree somebody planted because it looked nice.
- So now it's gotten to the point where cities and states across the South are running what they call "Bradford pear bounties."
  - Bring proof you cut one down, and they'll give you a native tree to replace it.
  - Think about that.
  - We went from planting them on purpose to paying people to cut them down.

- Botanists like to joke that there's only one correct way to prune a Bradford Pear – and that's a single, horizontal cut at the base.
  - A couple of years ago, we actually "pruned" ours and replaced them with maple trees.
  - Nobody drives past and says, "Remember how pretty those were?"
  - If anything, we're a little embarrassed we ever planted them.
- I think the Bradford pear is a pretty good picture of sin.
  - Sin always looks good when you plant it.
  - It grows fast. It's cheap.
  - It gives you results almost immediately.
- For a season, it might even be the prettiest thing in your life.

  - But give it a little time.
  - Then you start to notice what it actually produces.
  - It doesn't stay contained.
  - It spreads into places you never meant it to go.
  - And sooner or later, you find yourself trying to cut down the very thing you were so glad to plant.
- Nobody plants sin expecting to be ashamed of it later.
  - But that's where it always leads.
  - So the question isn't, "How did it look when you planted it?"
  - The question is, "What did it produce?"
  - And maybe even more importantly, "Where does it end?"
  - Those are exactly the questions Paul asks as he brings Romans chapter 6 to a close.
- He asks what fruit we were getting from the old life. He tells us plainly where it ends.
  - And then he shows us a different kind of life.
  - One God starts by his grace and finishes with his gift.
  - Let's take a look at the last four verses of Romans chapter 6.

Scripture Reading

> **ROMANS 6:20-23** (ESV)
>
> *20 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. 22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

- Romans 6 started with a question: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?"
  - Paul restates the question in v. 15: "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?"
  - It isn't an illogical question.

- In fact, back in chapter 5, Paul even said this "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."
- So one could come to the conclusion – the more you sin, the better grace looks, and the better grace looks, the greater God looks.
- But Paul says that kind of thinking doesn't fit who we are now.
- Paul's answer to this suggestion, found in both v. 2 and v. 15 – "By no means."
- It's two words in the Greek and it basically means, "Let that never happen."

- He then explains the reason that Christians can't think this way.
  - In Christ, our old self was crucified, which means we've been set free from sin.
  - That doesn't mean that we'll never sin again – but it does mean that our relationship to sin is dramatically different.
  - So when Christians sin, it isn't because we're seeking to maximize grace.
  - The reality is, we are thankful for grace. But a born-again heart would rather walk in obedience than keep sinning against the grace that saved us.
- And that's where Paul lands as he closes the chapter.
  - He doesn't just tell us not to go back. He makes us look at where we started.
  - Because once you see clearly where you came from, and where that road was headed, the old life loses its appeal.

Where We All Started

ROMANS 6:20-21

- When our boys were younger, we would participate in Pinewood Derbies.
  - It was always lots of fun.
  - You start with a block of wood, four little metal pins that would eventually become axles, and four little plastic wheels.
  - And then you deploy all of the tricks of the trade to make those little cars go as fast as possible down a track.
  - If you've ever done it, then you know there are all kinds of tricks.
    - You wanted to maximize weight. I think the car couldn't weigh more than 5 ounces.
    - You wanted to polish the axles with sandpaper and pumice stone.
    - You tried to cant the axles so the wheels ran on their edges, instead of making full contact.

        - Some people got really serious and carved their cars and added metal weights to shift the center of gravity.
    - At the starting line, you could easily identify the cars belonging to the dads… I mean the kids whose dads were engineers.
        - And the cars that were built by someone who didn't know the difference between a miter saw and a chainsaw.
        - Those engineered cars were going to be blazing fast… the other ones, well, you just hoped the wheels stayed on for the whole race.
    - But here's the deal: it didn't matter if the car was jury-rigged or engineered: At the starting line, they were all in the same place.
- In vv. 20–21, we find out what our starting line actually looked like.
    - And everybody is in the same place.
    - Paul already told us back in chapter 3: "There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."
    - All of the things that we use to divide us, those things don't matter.
    - Rich, poor. Male, female. Skin color, hair color, language.
    - We all start in the same place.
    - And that place is enslaved to sin.
- Back in v. 18, Paul said that when we are set free from sin, we become slaves of righteousness.
    - Here, v. 20 flips that.
    - When we are slaves to sin, we are free from righteousness.
    - What does that mean?
        - Righteousness had no authority over you.
        - It wasn't your master.
        - It gave you no orders.
        - And you weren't producing anything for it.
    - That doesn't mean that you were incapable of doing good.
        - Unbelievers can be kind, honest and generous.
        - But righteousness wasn't the master you served.
        - Nothing you did was done for it.
        - That's why v. 21 can ask, "What fruit were you getting?"
        - There was activity, but no fruit toward God.

- This is exactly the kind of freedom the world advertises: nobody telling me what to do, no rules, no one to answer to.

- And Paul intends this as irony.
  - Paul says yes, you had that freedom.
  - But it was freedom from the one master who leads to life, and it came packaged with slavery to the one who leads to death.
  - Jesus says the same thing in John 8:34: "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."
- And notice when the shame comes in v. 21. "The things of which you are now ashamed."
  - Now that God has set you free, you see those things differently.
  - What once looked desirable is something you're now ashamed of.
  - It's only after God set you free that you can finally see the old life for what it was.
- The other thing about that Pinewood Derby: it didn't matter what the car looked like or how much engineering went into it.
  - They were all headed to the exact same destination.
  - Once the pins that held them back were dropped, gravity took over.
  - Potential energy became kinetic energy, and they were all headed to the very same finish line at varying rates of speed.
- You could take just the uncarved pine block, untreated axles and wheels, put it on the track, and it's going to get to the same place as all the rest.
  - There were no turns, no options, no alternatives.
  - There was gravity, and there was a finish line.
  - And Paul tells us exactly what that finish line is: "The end of those things is death."
  - That word end means "destination" – in other words, this was always where the track was headed.
- Paul's point here is very clear.
  - We all started in the same place.
  - And we were all headed to the same destination.
  - And there was nothing we could do to stop it.
  - It was as guaranteed as the gravity that makes a wood block roll down a hill.
  - Unless someone took the car off the track.
- Some of us are still sitting at that starting line convinced our car is different.

- Better built. More religious. More respectable.
- A few more upgrades than the person next to us.
- But gravity doesn't care how well your car was engineered.

- Being a good person doesn't change the track you're on.
  - It just changes how you look going down it.
  - And if you're in Christ this morning, don't forget where you started.
  - You weren't on a different track.
  - You were on the same one as everybody else, until God stepped in.

What Changed

ROMANS 6:22

- And that's exactly what happens in v. 22.
  - Paul uses two very simple words that change everything: "But now…"
  - But now means that things aren't like they used to be.
  - We were on a track, and the only destination available was death.
- But now…
  - Someone took the car off the track.
  - Not by giving us a faster car.
  - Not by teaching us how to steer.
  - God reached down and took us off the track entirely.
- And Paul has already told us how.
  - Back in v. 6: "our old self was crucified with him."
  - He took the death that was waiting for us at the finish line.
- So Paul says we have "been set free from sin."
  - Notice who is doing the work here.
  - We didn't free ourselves.
  - We have been set free.
  - This is a work that ONLY God can do.
  - That's why Paul uses the language of slaves and masters.
  - Slaves can't just decide to change masters.

- Someone has to buy them out.
- And that's exactly what Christ did.

- Paul says we have "become slaves of God."
  - And look at the fruit that comes from that: "the fruit you get leads to sanctification."
  - Sanctification is a big church word. It gets tossed around a lot, but it rarely gets explained.
- Sanctification is the lifelong work God does in us to make us more like Jesus.
  - And it's different from justification.
  - We've dealt with justification a lot over these last few chapters.
  - Justification deals with our guilt.
  - God declares us righteous because of what Christ has done.
  - It happens once, and it's finished.
  - If you are truly justified, you're never unjustified.
- Sanctification deals with our hearts.
  - God actually changes us.
  - And that takes a lifetime.
- One is an act. The other is a work.
  - They always go together.
  - But they aren't the same thing.
- Think of it like this.
  - The Christian life has a start, a middle, and a finish.
  - The start is the moment God gives you new life.
    - When He takes you off the track.
    - That is when you are justified.
  - The finish is glorification.
    - The day you see Jesus face to face and finally become everything He made you to be.
  - Sanctification is everything in between.
    - And it's not just cleaning up the outside.
    - It's not behavior modification.
  - God is reshaping the whole person: what you want, how you think, how you love.
    - That doesn't mean we sit back and wait to change.

        - Because God has made us alive, we fight sin, practice obedience, and offer ourselves to Him.
        - We aren't earning new life.
        - We're living out the new life He's given us.

- He uses ordinary means to do it.
    - His Word. Prayer.
    - Honest self-examination.
- Paul describes it in 2 Corinthians 3:18.
- We "are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."
    - One degree at a time.
    - That means you'll still struggle.
    - There aren't any shortcuts.
- But the struggle isn't proof God has stopped working on you.
    - A lot of times, it's proof that He hasn't.
    - This is important.
    - This means that your life in Christ is a gift.
    - This means that growing into the likeness of Christ is grace.
    - It is why the Bible can admonish us to count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds – because it is part of this work that God is doing in us.
    - Likewise, those ordinary means are a blessing.
    - The Word, prayer, the encouragement that we experience in the Body of Christ.
    - Those aren't burdens that we have to bear – those are the blessed tools God uses to chip away everything about us that isn't like Himself.
- And at some point, known only in the mind of God, he will finish that process.
    - I love how Paul expresses that very point in the introduction of his letter to the Philippian Church.

> **PHILIPPIANS 1:6** (ESV)
>
> 6 *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

Where We Finish

ROMANS 6:22B-23

- The end of v. 22 says that the end of sanctification is eternal life.
  - Back in v. 21, we found that the "end" of those who were slaves to sin was death.
  - But here, we are graciously reminded that it isn't the only "end."
  - Same word. Vastly different destination.
  - There is an end that points past itself into a glorious eternity.
- But then Paul sums up the entire chapter with one verse – v. 23.
  - It is one of the most quoted verses in gospel conversations.
  - "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."
- Many of us learned this verse a long time ago.
  - If you've ever been taught the Romans Road, this is one of the stops.
  - And it should be.
  - It's the gospel in one verse.
- But pay attention to who Paul is talking to.
  - Throughout this, he's been talking to "you."
  - That "you" represents the Christians who live in Rome.
- He isn't writing to people who don't know Jesus.
  - He's writing to Christians.
  - He wants believers to remember this, too.
  - Because it's easy to forget where the old road ends, and it's easy to forget how we got onto the new one.
  - So let's look at both halves.
- First, "the wages of sin is death."
  - The word Paul uses for "wages" is the word for a soldier's pay.
  - It was what a soldier received, regularly and reliably, for his service.
  - He earned it.
  - It was owed to him.
  - And Paul says sin is a master that always pays.
    - It never misses a payday.

        - It never shortchanges you.
        - Whatever you've earned working for sin, sin is going to pay you in full.
        - And the pay is death.
    - Not just physical death.
        - Separation from God.
        - Forever.
    - Nobody gets cheated by sin when payday comes.
        - That's the problem.
        - Sin lies about what it promises.
        - It promises freedom. It promises satisfaction.
        - It promises life.
        - But when payday comes, everybody gets exactly what they've earned.
        - And the pay is death.
    - But then Paul says "but," and everything turns.
- "But the free gift of God is eternal life."
    - The word Paul uses for "free gift" comes from the same root as the word for grace.
    - Paul is deliberate about this.
    - Death is wages. Life is a gift.
    - One you earn. The other you can only receive.
    - You can't work for eternal life.
    - You can't save up for it.
    - You can't put in enough overtime to deserve it.
- If you could earn it, it would be wages, and Paul refuses to call it that.
    - And "eternal life" isn't just life that goes on forever.
    - Jesus defined it in John 17:3: "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."
    - Eternal life is knowing God.
    - Starting now, and never ending.
- And then don't miss the last phrase: "in Christ Jesus our Lord."
    - That gift isn't floating around out there for anybody to pick up.
    - It's found in a Person.

  - You don't get eternal life apart from Jesus.
    - Eternal life is found in Jesus.
    - And that means the finish line isn't secured by how well you ran the race.
    - It's secured by Him.
- So what does that mean for us?
  - If you're in Christ, stop going back to collect from your old master.
  - Sin doesn't have anything to offer you anymore except more of what it always paid.
  - Why would you keep showing up for work at a place that only pays in death?
  - But just as important, stop trying to earn what's already been given.
- A lot of Christians know they were saved by grace, but they live like they have to keep earning their way to the finish.
  - They treat God's gift like it's a paycheck they have to keep qualifying for.
  - It isn't.
- The same grace that took you off the track is the grace that will carry you all the way to the end.
  - You didn't earn your start.
  - You won't earn your finish.
- From start to finish, it's a gift.

Conclusion

- If you head down 193 about 15 miles, you'll cross over Pigeon Mountain at Dug Gap.
  - You may not realize it, but as you're driving over the mountain, there's a long dark tunnel beside the road that goes through the mountain.
  - It was a tunnel that trains would go through that used to run on the TAG line.
  - A lot of you have probably been there.
- The trains stopped running a long time ago.
  - The tracks are gone. But the tunnel is still there.
  - From the entrance, it looks simple enough.
  - An old brick archway, set into the side of the mountain.
  - It's long. It's dark.

- And it is not dry.

- There's standing water most of the way.
  - Wall to wall. There's no dry edge to walk on.
  - Within a few steps, your shoes are soaked, and they stay that way.
- But way down at the other end, you can see light.
  - A little circle of daylight.
  - And every step you take, it gets a little bigger.
  - And when you finally get to the end, the light is real.
  - The way out is open.
  - You can walk right out into the daylight.
- Now, here's what I want you to notice about that tunnel.
  - Nobody walking through it made that way out.
  - Somebody cut that tunnel through solid rock long before any of us ever set foot in it.
  - The light at the end isn't there because you walked well.
  - It's there because someone else already made the way through.
- All you do is walk the road that was made for you.
  - That's the Christian life.
  - It isn't always dry. It isn't always bright.
  - Some stretches are cold and dark, and you can't always see what you're stepping in.
- But the light at the end of this road is real.
  - Paul says its end is eternal life.
  - And the way through wasn't cut by you.
- It was cut by Jesus, who went into the darkness of death and came out the other side.
  - He didn't just show you the way out.
  - He made it.
- So you don't walk toward that light hoping it's real.
  - You walk toward it knowing it is.
  - The road you're on doesn't end at a dead end.
  - It ends in the presence of God, forever.
  - What God started by His grace, He will finish with His gift.

- Remember those Bradford pears in our church yard?
  - When we finally cut them down, we didn't just leave stumps.
  - We planted maples in their place.
  - Trees that would actually grow into something good.
- That's what God does with a life.
  - Repentance is the cut.
  - It's saying, "I'm done with this. I don't want what it produces anymore."
  - But God doesn't leave you with a stump.
  - He plants something new.
  - Something that actually grows.
  - Something that ends in eternal life.
- So let me ask you the question Paul asked: What is your life producing?
  - Maybe you've never trusted Christ.
    - You've spent years watering something that has never given you anything good.
    - It looked great when you planted it.
    - It isn't producing anything now.
    - And you know exactly where it ends.
    - This morning, you can stop.
    - You can't get yourself off that track, but you don't have to.
    - Turn from your sin.
    - Tell God the truth about it.
    - And trust Jesus, who went down that road all the way to the end so you wouldn't have to.
    - The gift is free.
    - It's yours to receive this morning.
- Maybe you're already in Christ.
  - He took you off the track a long time ago.
    - But if you're honest, there's still something growing in your life that you know doesn't belong there.
    - You've trimmed it back.
    - You've managed it.

        - But you've never cut it down to the base.
    - Today's the day to make that cut.
        - Not to earn anything.
        - He has already given you everything.
    - But because you belong to Him now, and that tree doesn't belong in His yard.
- And maybe you're honestly not sure where you stand.
    - You've been around church.
    - You know the words.
    - But you don't know what road you're on.
    - Then look at the fruit.
    - Fruit matters.
    - But your hope isn't in finding enough good in yourself. It's in Jesus Christ.
    - Come talk with us about what it means to trust Him.
    - And don't leave here without settling it.
- Whichever one is you this morning, I don't want you to leave without doing something about it.
    - During this last song, the altar is open.
    - Come pray. Come find an elder.
    - Come let someone pray with you.
- Because what God starts, He always finishes.