

---

*“The War Within”*

ROMANS 7:13-20

JULY 9, 2023

PASTOR BRIAN SMITH

WILDWOOD CHURCH

EAST MOLINE, ILLINOIS

---

## AT A GLANCE

Have you ever come to a place in your life that you’ve cried out to the Lord in desperation, “Why won’t you take this sinful desire from me? Why do I keep going back to it?” If so, you can resonate with the war within that Paul describes in this passage in Romans 7. Christian, you’re going to wrestle with the sin nature until Jesus comes back. This is not an excuse to sin, but a call to fight the flesh and hope in Christ!

## INTRODUCTION

In today’s passage we’re going to see a person’s internal struggle vocalized. For everyone who hates their sin and comes to a place of utter desperation, crying out, “Why won’t you take this desire from me?” this is a breathe of fresh air.

The passage is widely debated and there are two primary ways it’s interpreted. One interpretation is that in this passage Paul is describing his former life as an unregenerate, though zealous, Jew, striving to obey the Law without the aide of the Holy Spirit. The other interpretation is that he portrays the on-going war that a born-again believer feels and fights within. The latter is the interpretation I lean toward though I appreciate the arguments for the former view.

I don’t see the wrestle Paul describes in Romans 7 as the wrestle of a self-righteous legalist, but of a man who loves the Lord and is keenly aware of how far he falls short of living worthy of Him.

What I think we can all agree on is our life is a walking contradiction, to use Daniel Doriani’s turn of phrase. One moment we’re singing and praising the Lord, filled with eager anticipation and hope and commitment to live our lives to the glory of God. And the next we’re melting on the floor over something that didn’t go our way and we’re feeling like victims rather than victors.

One moment we’re confessing sin and diving headlong into the disciplines of the faith like Bible study, Christian fellowship, praying, fasting, giving, all the things. And the next we’re convincing ourselves that skipping church again, pulling back from our groups, getting spiritually lazy is ok, because you know “legalism.” One moment we’re standing boldly for the Lord, the next we’re giving in to sin.

We’re walking contradictions. That’s real life. No matter who you are, that’s real life. And it can be really demoralizing. So, I praise the Lord for Paul’s vulnerability. Knowing that we are not alone in our struggle just might help us stay in the fight and keep us leaning on the Holy Spirit.

In the current section, Romans 6:1 - 8:39 Paul describes the complex nature of living in the already-not yet. The Lord has already come and established His kingdom. But we await His second coming and the full consummation of it. Similarly, we are already believers, already saved, already free of the bondage of sin, already indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, and yet we await the final consummation of our salvation when Jesus returns.

While we're in the already-not yet tension, life is complex. We're released from sin but we still feel the pull of sin in our lives. We have the Holy Spirit in our lives, yet we must be reminded to live by the Spirit. Already, not-yet. Tension between who we are in the spirit and the pull of the flesh toward evil. There's a war within.

## Romans 7:13-20

<sup>13</sup> **Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.** <sup>14</sup> For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. <sup>15</sup> For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. <sup>17</sup> So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

## THE PROBLEM IS NOT THE LAW, BUT SIN

Verse 13 says **Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means!** If the law is holy righteous and **good**, (7:12) how could it **bring death to me?** It could not! It is God's perfect will. It is given us by God Himself. What then shall we say? How do we justify the statement in 7:5, that "our sinful passions were aroused by the law...to bear fruit for death?"

Answer: **It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.**

*"...through the law comes knowledge of sin"* Paul said in *Romans 3:20*. The law magnifies our sin. It provides all the opportunities we need for our sinful passions to express themselves fully and completely **in order that sin might be shown to be sin.**

Verses 14-15 read **For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.**

Paul used first person pronouns in the present tense. The simplest way to interpret this is that he is describing the internal tension he feels as a work in progress. We certainly feel the wrestle in our own lives, don't we? We feel the tension described by Paul in Galatians 5, *"For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do."* Galatians 5:17

## THE VERY REAL STRUGGLE OF BELIEVERS EVERYWHERE

This is the very real struggle of believers everywhere. It's ok to acknowledge we haven't arrived at perfection yet. It's ok to acknowledge your sin. It's not ok to justify it. Justifying is acting as if your sin really isn't sin. Acknowledging it is agreeing that it's sin, even if you must say as Paul said, **I do not understand my own actions.**

Paul hated the things he did, and he wanted to do the things that pleased God, but didn't. These sentiments Paul expressed in Romans 7 are rarely sentiments expressed by unregenerate people.

I see unregenerate people erring in two ways as it relates to a life worthy of the Lord. The one Paul described in Romans 1. They hate the law and suppress the truth about God. The other Paul demonstrated in his own life before Christ. They imagine they're doing a great job at it.

Consider what Paul said about his former life as a pharisee in *Philippians 3:6*, “...as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” Can you imagine calling yourself blameless under the Law of God?! Rather than wrestling with his own sin, the unregenerate person looks to his achievements and applauds himself.

## EVIDENCE OF REGENERATION

The evidence one is regenerate and growing in faith is an increasing awareness of one’s fallenness, sinfulness, and ever-present dependence upon God’s grace. In short, we continue to feel and fight the war within. Evidence one is not regenerate is that they are convinced of their own righteousness, despite the evidence to the contrary.

Romans 7 ought to be a comfort to every born-again child of God. No one was more committed to honoring the Lord Jesus with his life than the Apostle Paul. Yet he continued to feel and fight the war within himself.

I’m reminded of Charles Spurgeon who said, “If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him, for you are worse than he thinks you to be.” Each of us has some kind of sin we continually wrestle with that we so desperately want Jesus to liberate us from. Our desire to be free does not release us from the guilt of sin, but it does remind us that His grace is sufficient for us. No matter how hard we try, Jesus is right, “*The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*” *Matthew 26:41*

We feel this duality within us. And this is what Paul appeals to next. Saying, **The law is spiritual** – It is given to us by God. **But I am of the flesh, sold under sin** – I feel the pull toward evil constantly. I feel the pressure in my mind, in my heart.

## AN HONEST PASTOR

This is an honest pastor. Paul is being vulnerable. I have to admit that as much as I love Jesus and love His law and know that He gives me life, my flesh is at war within me. My flesh wages war in my mind, in the members of my body, in my tongue, in my heart.

This is why Paul, after describing his life before his incredible conversion in *Philippians 3*, says, “*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:12-14*

Paul had a radical conversion story – from persecuting Christians to being persecuted as one – and yet despite his former life as an extremely religious Jew, his final assessment of himself was “chief of sinners, saying, “...*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.*” *1 Timothy 1:15*

## THE WAR WITHIN

There’s a war within and while we fight from a place of victory, we still have to fight. We still press on. We still run with endurance. We strain forward. We do not grow complacent with our sin. We stop thinking that we can’t be changed, that it’s “just who I am.” It may be who you are, but it’s not who God wants you to be.

Let’s continue to **verse 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.** There’s something here we need to unpack. We sin because we want to sin. I can say that I sin because I want to sin, but I do not really want to sin. This is a true statement even though it seems contradictory. My flesh causes me to want to sin. But in my spirit, I do not really want to sin, knowing sin dishonors the Lord and brings death.

Thus, you can **agree with the law that it is good** and still break it. You break the law because you want to, but there is another part of you that agrees it’s wrong. This tension is unique to a regenerate

person. Plenty of people feel guilty about sin. But only the regenerate agree that the Law is good and that your sin is a violation of God's law.

You agree with the law that what you're doing is not right. You wrestle against your flesh, knowing that what you're doing isn't right. We call this a having a conscience. This is spiritual conviction.

In **verse 17** Paul takes it a step further. **So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.** I am not breaking the law, but **sin that dwells within me** is breaking the law. This sort of sounds like blame shifting. No, Paul is not absolving himself from responsibility. He is describing the dual nature of a believer. Spirit and Flesh.

The flesh is the source of our sin and Paul can look on that not from a place of identity, but from duality. His identity is in Christ. He is a new creation. He is a child of God. Blood bought, forgiven, co-heir with Christ. That's who he is. That's his identity. But his flesh, his old self, still kicking and screaming, is waging war within him. It is his flesh, his sin that dwells within that causes him to do the things he does not want to do.

As a child of God, he agrees that God's ways are right, and just, and good. But his sin nature, his flesh, constantly pulls him back and occasionally he gives in. Just think about your own life and your own experience. How often have you desired with all your might to do what pleases God only to be pulled down by your flesh and fall into sin?

### THREE SCENARIOS

You so want this conversation to go well, to not gossip, to not slander, to not discourage. You're prayed up. You go in determined to honor the Lord. And then the conversation rolls along, and you let your lips get loose. You reflect on the conversation, and you feel guilty.

Here's another scenario. You head out on a date, and you've determined you're going to remain pure in your thoughts, words, and actions. You're prayed up. You've invited some brothers or sisters to hold you accountable. The date is going great! There's chemistry. One thing leads to another, and you cross a line you hate and you can't look at yourself in the mirror the next day.

One more. You've determined you're going to honor the Lord with your income. You're going to give, save, and spend as a wise steward of God's resources. You're prayed up before you head to the mall or the car dealership or online. Then all the shiny things, like a bass lure flittering in the sunlight, catch your eyes and captivate your heart. You walk away wondering how you could be so foolish once again.

### THE EPICENTER OF SIN

You are a redeemed child of God. But there is an old man in you, or an old lady, which Paul calls the flesh; it's the epicenter of your sin. Yes, you sinned. However, to Paul's point, that is no longer who you are. That is your flesh and it's at war within you.

This is Paul's point in **verse 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.**

Paul is explaining what he means by "it's not me but sin in me." I realize that in myself, in my flesh, I have **nothing good** to offer the Lord. I am totally corrupted in my flesh. **I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability.**

Paul desires to do what is right. Did he have the desire to do what was right in his former life? As a Pharisee, probably. But as a pharisee, he also thought he had the ability. "Blameless," remember?! Now he says he has the desire to carry it out, but not the ability. He's wrestling in the tension.

**Verse 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.** I keep failing in this fight! And **verse 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.**

Paul reiterates that it is **sin that dwells within me** that causes me to fail. In the words of Kent Hughes, “Paul recognizes he is a man with two natures. One delights in the Law of God. The other wages war against God’s Law.” Thus, it is with you and me. We live in the tension of the already, but not yet. We feel the war raging within us. We hate our sin. We want to be rid of it completely. We know that our sin destroys and we beg God to take it from us. One day sin will be a thing of our past in every possible way.

## WE REMIND OURSELVES OF THE GOSPEL

Until then we continually remind ourselves of the Gospel. We remind ourselves that this sin, as with all the sin we have ever committed and all the sin we will ever commit, is “nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O, my soul.”

We remind ourselves that we are saved by grace through faith alone. Our justification is not contingent upon our works. That you wrestle with sin is indicative of your salvation. That you desire to do what pleases the Lord and yet realize you lack the ability to perfectly execute that is indicative of your salvation.

Not only that, but we remind ourselves of God’s love for us, demonstrated in the death of His one and only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Nothing proves to us that we are beloved by the Father like the cross of Christ. And how do we practically remind ourselves of God’s love? We observe the Lord’s Supper. This ordinance is given to us by the Lord to be a constant reminder of His sacrificial atonement for our sin. Your sin and my sin was so bad that God sent His own Son and subjected Him to crucifixion and He poured out upon Him the full cup of His wrath. All this so that you and I could come into a saving relationship with Him as a loving and merciful Heavenly Father.

## EXAMINE YOUR HEARTS

Two things for you to process this morning as you examine your hearts in preparation for the Lord’s Supper. Two things that I observe all the time in ministry.

1. First is what I might call “spiritual apathy.” Are you in the fight? Christian, are you engaged in battle in the war within? To disengage and to tolerate your sin because you’ve already been forgiven is at best the most entitled thing anyone can do and at worst indicates one isn’t saved and forgiven at all. The flesh cons you into believing that holy living is legalistic or no longer necessary.
2. Second is what I might call “spiritual burden.” Are you so burdened by your sin that you’re driven to despair and lack joy in your life? When something goes wrong do you immediately think God is punishing you for your sin; that you’ve lost His favor and somehow have to earn it back? This might come across humble and noble, but it’s really a denial of the goodness of God and His grace. The flesh throws your sin back in your face and says, “How could a holy God love you?”

To those who resonate more with the first, I want you to hear the words of Paul and find conviction.

To those who resonate more with the latter, I want you to find comfort.

I encourage the former to pick up your spiritual armor and get in the fight with Christ.

I encourage the latter to lay down your burdens and stand in the light of Christ.

And since most of us are bouncing between both groups, living in the tension, I encourage us all to do both! Pick up your armor and lay down your burdens. There's a war within...so kill the flesh and delight in Christ, your righteousness.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bruce, F. F. (2008). *Romans: An introduction and commentary*. Inter-Varsity Press.
- Doriani, D. M. (2021). *Romans*. P&R Publishing.
- Hughes, Kent R. (1991). *Romans – Righteousness from Heaven*. Crossway.
- Kruse, Colin G. (2012). *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Longenecker, Richard N. (2016). *The Epistle to the Romans*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- MacArthur, John. (1991). *Romans 1-8*. Moody Publishers.
- MacArthur, John. (1991). *Romans 9-16*. Moody Publishers.
- Moo, Douglas J. (2018). *The Letter to the Romans, Second Edition*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Mounce, Robert. (1995). *Romans*. B&H Publishing.
- Schreiner, Thomas R. (2018). *Romans, Second Edition*. Baker Publishing Group.
- Sproul, R. C. (2019). *The Righteous Shall Live By Faith – Romans*. Ligonier Ministries