



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

The Battle Within

Invisible War: Winning Against Evil | Part 4

Steve Lombardo | July 5, 2015 | Romans 7:14–25



Turn to Romans 7:14–25. This is going to be our spiritual food for today. As you turn there, I want to review with you where we are in our sermon series. We started our series called, “Invisible War: Battling Against Evil,” at the beginning of the summer. We began by becoming aware of the spiritual warfare happening all around us. Just because we can’t see it, doesn’t mean it’s not real. During the last two Sundays we have studied two of the adversaries that we face:

1. The devil, demons and the spiritual realm. Though the devil is a defeated enemy, he is still working to make Christians ineffective for Kingdom work on earth.
2. The world. The world is opposed to the things of God. If you are a friend of the world, you’re an enemy of God. We were challenged to recognize the world as an enemy, but not to completely disengage from it. We must engage society around us with the good news of Jesus Christ. We are called to be salt and light wherever God has placed us.

Today we are taking a look at our third and final enemy: the flesh. If you are a believer today, you know what the gospel is. Because we are in Romans, let’s use Romans to look at the gospel in a nutshell:

- Romans 3:10, “*None is righteous, no, not one.*”
- Romans 3:23, “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” We are all sinners. Whether we want to admit it or not, “*all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way*” (Isaiah 53:6).
- Romans 6:23, “*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” We are messed up people because we’re born with a sinful nature. Not only that, we choose to do what is wrong in God’s sight. We consistently fall short of God’s perfection and holiness.
- Romans 1:18, “*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*” We are lost. We are objects of God’s wrath, destined for destruction because of our sin and rebellion.
- Romans 5:8, “*But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” Jesus Christ came. He didn’t wait for us to become good and clean to love us. He loved us while we were dirty, rotten and sinful. So much so that He gave His life for us.
- Romans 10:9–10, “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*” Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved. Jesus saves sinners who call on Him.

This is the gospel. In Romans 1:17, Paul writes, “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*”

Once you’re saved and become a believer, you don’t sin anymore, right Christians? No, that doesn’t happen. How many of you haven’t sinned in the past year? We all still sin. We all struggle with sin to some degree. This is what we’re talking about today: the battle that rages within us. Not only do we have the devil as an enemy and the world around us as an enemy, sadly, we have an enemy right inside of us. This enemy is the flesh. Martin Luther said this: “In the gospel, we are forgiven of sin and yet we do not cease to be sinners for we are flesh and we feel the battle within. The more godly a man is, the more he feels the battle.” We deal

with the flesh. We struggle with sin. We struggle with addictions. There are stories of those who battle addiction and come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ; God saves them and instantaneously the addiction is gone. However, for most, addiction remains a struggle. Whether that addiction is a substance, pornography or chronic lying, there is a struggle against the sinful self: our flesh. We all face this battle on one level or another.

The challenge today is: are you battling against your flesh? Are you fighting? Let's turn to our text for today. Romans 7:14–25:

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. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 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. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

There are three historical interpretations of this passage.

1. Paul is speaking as an unbeliever. He's speaking of himself as a Pharisee who didn't know Jesus Christ. He loved the law, but he couldn't please God. He kept on falling into sin.
2. Paul is speaking as a believer. This is the view we will ascribe to as we look at this passage because Paul is speaking in the present tense about his own life. At the end of Romans 7:25, he says, "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" Then he says, "*I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.*" This is a present reality in the life of Paul.
3. Paul is writing about carnal Christians or backslidden believers. These people have come to faith in Jesus Christ. They've come to know Jesus as their Savior, but they're giving in to their flesh. [I don't think this is the case here.]

Paul is speaking in the present tense about the struggles that he has as a believer with his flesh. We also struggle with the flesh. This passage has bothered me for some time because we all face this battle, but God can give us the victory. The big idea is this: we will struggle with sin, but Jesus Christ gives us the victory.

1. The Problem — The Flesh | Romans 7:14–20

Romans 7:14, "*For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.*" The flesh is a slave to sin. The flesh is sold to sin. The flesh, according to the dictionary, is "the soft tissue parts of our body." Is this what Paul means when he talks about the flesh? No. When Paul uses the word "flesh" he is referring to our sinful self or our sinful nature. That's the problem. It is the part of us that wants to do wrong.

The Law of God reveals sin in our lives

We see this earlier in Romans 7:7: "*What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.*" The Law of God—the Ten Commandments, His righteousness, and His standard of holiness—reveals our sin. We cannot meet the bar. We can't keep all of the Ten Commandments perfectly. Jesus said that if you break one of them, you're guilty of breaking the whole law.

The Law of God stirs up our flesh to sin

Romans 7:8, "*But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.*" Not only does God's Law reveal our sin—that we cannot measure up—but it also stirs up sin. We hear, "Do not covet," and now we have the desire to covet. Augustine wrote this in his *Confessions*.

As a child there was a pear tree near our vineyard laden with fruit. One stormy night we rascally youths set out to rob it and carry our spoils away. We took off a huge load of pears, not to feast upon ourselves, but to throw them to the pigs, though we ate just enough to have pleasure at the forbidden fruit. They were nice pears, but it was not the pears that my wretched soul

coveted, for I had plenty better at home. I picked them simply in order to become a thief. The only feast I got was the feast of iniquity, and that I enjoyed to the full. What was it that I loved in the theft? Was it the pleasure of acting against the law in order that I, a prisoner under rules, might have a maimed counterfeit of freedom by doing what was forbidden with a dim sense of omnipotence? The desire to steal was awakened simply by the prohibition of stealing.

I remember going to my grandparents' apartment in Des Moines, Iowa. We would have so much fun at the pool. One year we came and there was a sign posted that said, "No diving." So what did my brothers and I do? We dove. The law does this. It's not that the law is bad—"By no means!" Paul says—it's that our flesh is bad. Our flesh is sinful. It is our sinful self. The law stirs up our flesh to sin.

The flesh does battle with our minds and spirit. It is continually inclined toward sin. Thomas à Kempis wrote about this frustration, stating:

I desire to enjoy God inwardly, but I cannot take God. I desire to cleave to heavenly things, but fleshly things and unmortified passions depress me. I will in my mind to be above all things, but in spite of myself I am constrained to be beneath. So I, unhappy man, fight with myself and am made grievous to myself while the Spirit seeketh what is beneath. Oh what I suffer within. While as I think on heavenly things in my mind, the company of fleshly things cometh against me when I pray.

Have you experienced that, believer? As you get down on your knees seeking the Lord in prayer, the flesh is right there to distract from your time of communion with your Creator God. The flesh is the problem. The flesh is inclined to sin.

What does your flesh struggle with? We want to do battle in a real way. This is why we are going through this series. Go before the Lord, even now, and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the sin that has entangled you. Pray, "Lord, what sin needs to be put to death in my flesh?" The Lord reveals sin in our lives through His Spirit. Our flesh longs for that sin. We confess that sin unto the Lord and He forgives us. When we come to Christ, He forgives all our sin—past, present and future. Yet, the flesh continues to go back to the sins that easily entangle us. Today we want to have victory. We want to fight the good fight against the flesh.

2. The Process — Is Hard | Romans 7:21—25

Paul is giving a detailed account of what we all have experienced. He has the desire to do what's right, but not the ability to carry it out. He wants to do the good, but then ends up doing the bad. He doesn't want to do the bad and he ends up doing it. Then in Romans 7:21 he says:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 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.

Paul mentions "law" here five times. This doesn't refer to the Law of God—the Ten Commandments—the righteous requirements of the Lord God Almighty. Paul is saying that this is a principle or a truth: when he wants to do right, evil is right there and every time he wants to do good, his members are struggling not to do that good.

This process is hard. The principle is this: we have two natures living within us. Galatians 5:17 says, "*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.*" An old Southern preacher would say, "You've got two dogs livin' in you. You got yer sinful nature and you got yer holy nature. An' these dogs are fightin'. Which dog are you feedin'?" It's true. It's a hard process; it's a battle.

It was hard for Paul. He says, "Oh wretched man that I am!" Remember, this was the Apostle Paul. When he was Saul of Tarsus, Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, spoke to him, and he was changed forever. He was the missionary of all missionaries. He took the gospel all over the known world. He planted dozens and dozens of churches. He was a miracle worker. He brought the gospel to the most remote parts of the known world. He was hoping to go to Spain before he was arrested in Rome and he struggled with that. In Acts 19:12, some of the handkerchiefs that he used were taken to the sick and they were healed. [How many of your tissues have healed people?] This is the Apostle Paul. One guy fell asleep during one of Paul's sermons, fell out of the window and died. Paul went and healed him in the Name of Jesus. This is the Apostle who wrote Scripture. What's your testimony like?

This is the Apostle Paul who says, "Oh wretched man that I am." If it was a struggle for Paul, it's going to be a struggle for you. The process is hard, but we can have victory through Jesus Christ. If you are an unbeliever, you fight this same battle against the flesh.

However, you are fighting a losing battle. You can't win by yourself. The only answer is Jesus Christ. He alone gives the victory. If you are a carnal Christian, the only answer is Jesus Christ. If you are a believer and you are living for the Lord through the ups and downs of life and you're struggling against the flesh, Jesus Christ gives the victory.

3. The Plan — Grace-driven Effort

If we stopped in Romans 7, it would be rather depressing. Paul says that we have the victory in Jesus Christ, but He doesn't expound on it. He actually goes back to the struggle at the end of the chapter. The struggle is still raging. You will have this struggle until you see Jesus. This can be depressing, but the Scriptures don't leave it at that. Romans 7 and Romans 8 should be side-by-side in the mind of the believer. In Romans 8, we see how we must live. There is a plan.

This plan requires us to battle against the flesh. If you want to be effective in the war, if you want to gain victory over the flesh, you're going to have to do some work. This isn't a legalistic list of things that you need to do better. This isn't about how many hours you're praying, or how many Scriptures you're memorizing, or how often you go to church. That sort of thinking is detrimental to spiritual growth. This is about a relationship with Jesus Christ. It takes work. Every relationship takes work. This is a grace-driven effort. Don Carson describes this grace-driven effort in his book, *For the Love of God, Volume 2*:

People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.

Several years ago I was talking to a guy who was looking for a job. He was complaining that he didn't have any leads and was bummed out about it. I asked him if he had applied anywhere. His response was, "No, no. I'm waiting on God to open the door to apply." I asked him if he had put his resume together. He said, "No, no. I'm waiting on the Lord, on His timing." He hadn't called anywhere because he thought he was waiting on God. That's not waiting on God; that's not working. That's not putting any effort into the job at hand. In order to gain the victory over your flesh, it will take effort on your part. Are you up for it?

Live according to the Spirit | Romans 8:1–8

This is the first part of the plan. Set your mind on the things of the Spirit. Romans 8:1–4:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Jesus came and condemned sin on the cross. He met the righteous requirement of the law for us. If you put your faith and hope in the Messiah, your sins are reckoned paid. Now we live according to the Spirit.

Paul goes on in Romans 8:5 to say, "*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.*" Part of the plan for victory is thinking correctly and setting our minds on the things of the Spirit. What are these things? People think about many things. However, we're called to think about the things of the Spirit. What's the fruit of the Spirit? Galatians 5:22–23: "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*" These are things of the Spirit. In Philippians 4:8 Paul says, "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*" Think about these right and good things. Think about the Lord. Pursue that which is right.

Many of us, however, don't think about those things. Instead people think about:

1. Your person
2. Your preferences
3. Your family
4. Your work

5. Your world

These things in and of themselves are not bad. However, here's the problem: the flesh. The flesh rises up and says things about your person, "Who am I? What do I look like? Am I looking good enough? What are people seeing in me? What do people think about me? I want to make sure to please people. Forget about God."

The flesh raises questions about your preferences: "Why can't people do what I want them to do? Why can't my wife do what I say? Why doesn't that church do things the way that I want to do things? My own preferences should rule the day."

The flesh rises up against family: "My kids are the best. I find my hope and completion in my kids. I find it in my spouse. They are my whole world, my salvation."

With your job the flesh can take you to a place where you're working all the time and neglecting the things that shouldn't be neglected. Or it can take you to the other end of the spectrum where you become lazy and do a poor job. Regarding the world, the flesh can cause you to become engaged with the things of the world and love the world.

Grow in your relationship with Jesus Christ | 2 Corinthians 3:12–18a

The plan involves not only our spiritual thinking, but also our spiritual growth. In 2 Corinthians 3:12–18a, Paul is writing about the glories of the New Covenant of Jesus Christ, how the people of Israel rejected God, then he comes to verse 12:

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

The way that we go from one degree of glory to another, the way that we have victory over our flesh, is by beholding Jesus Christ. It comes by looking upon Him and His glory with unveiled face. Because of that we are changed from glory to glory. It is not a list of rules and regulations, but a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is about seeing Him better and understanding Him more. This is why we come to church. This is why we have personal times of devotion. The goal is to know Jesus Christ better. See what Jesus Christ has done for you. See Him on the cross. See Him risen. See His love for you in that while you were still a sinner, He died for you. When you understand Jesus more deeply, your relationship with Him grows and the things of the flesh get beaten down because of that love relationship with Jesus Christ. When you view Jesus properly, you can be victorious. Keep your eyes on Him.

My younger brother Joe was a Navy Seal. I loved talking to him about his training. One of the things that he didn't really like doing in his training was going for long dives. They wouldn't go super deep, but they would be down in the water at nighttime. It was pitch black and they couldn't see anything. They had a board that would tell them where to go. However, most of the time, they had to keep that board turned off. For him, that was the worst exercise. Every once in a while, a real seal would come up and put his face right in my brother's mask. That was jarring.

One of the other things he used to tell me about was his long seven-mile swim in the ocean. That was one of the beginning requirements, and he claimed it wasn't that hard. My brother was never a good swimmer. He was afraid to take a bath. He was afraid of water. Joining the Navy Seals was a way to conquer that fear. I asked him why it wasn't difficult. He told me that it was because they could always see the shore. Because of that, he could do the job.

When we see Jesus, when our eyes are fixed on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2), we can beat the flesh; we can gain victory. When our eyes are off of Jesus, then sin entangles us and our flesh rises up. However, when we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, we have a relationship with Him that is growing and we will win the battle. Fix your mind on the things of the Spirit and grow in your relationship with Jesus by seeing Him more clearly. This is the plan.

4. The Product — Christlikeness | 2 Corinthians 3:18b

Second Corinthians 3:18 says, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." When we see Jesus, He transforms us into the image of Himself. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Gaining victory over your flesh results in transformation

Romans 8:28 says, *"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."* We love that verse. We put it on our coffee mugs. However, we forget the verse that comes after it: *"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son"* (Romans 8:29). God works things together for our good. What is that good? That we would be more like Jesus Christ. That is the product of a victorious life over the flesh. We must be more like Jesus.

We are all on various paths. We're all at different levels of glory. The same is true for the person who has been walking with the Lord for 50 years and the person who has been walking with Him for five weeks. When we gain victory in Christ over our flesh, we will be transformed.

Are you fighting this battle? If you're not a Christian, you cannot even fight this battle. You're a slave to sin. Your flesh is enslaved to sin; your very soul is enslaved. However, if you are a Christian, are you fighting? Are you fighting against the flesh? Or, have you given up the fight over certain things? Have you consigned those sins to the mentality of "Oh, that's just what I do; I struggle with it"? Have you become so calloused that you no longer feel the weight of guilt over sins that used to bring you to your knees?

God is calling you today to get serious about your relationship with Him. He's calling you to make a grace-driven effort to set your mind on the things of the Spirit. He wants you to see Jesus better and put the flesh to death. Are you fighting? The end of Romans 7:25 says this: *"I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin."* This is a battle that will continue until we die. Jesus tells us, *"In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33). It is only through Jesus Christ that we can have victory over the flesh.

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