

Sermons through

Romans

Total Depravity

Part 1

Romans 3:9-20

With Study Questions

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What then? Are we better *than they*? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. ¹⁰ As it is written: *“There is none righteous, no, not one; ¹¹There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. ¹²They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.” ¹³“Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit”; “The poison of asps is under their lips”; ¹⁴“Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.” ¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶Destruction and misery are in their ways; ¹⁷ And the way of peace they have not known.” ¹⁸“There is no fear of God before their eyes.” ¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. ²⁰ Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin. ¹ (Romans 3:9-20).*

Introduction

Whilst eaves-dropping on a conversation between a seminary professor and a student, I was a bit struck by the professor’s argument against the Reformed Doctrines of Grace, i.e. Calvinism. It was Total Depravity in particular for which the professor had distaste (at least in this chapter of the conversation) and he referenced, in his critique of Total Depravity, the very chapter under our examination.

The professor didn’t offer any concrete refutation of this passage (at least not at this time), he merely sighed “It’s all about Romans 3”. It appeared as if he thought Calvinists spent all their devotional energy meditating on a misunderstanding of the third chapter of Romans – embracing and conveying a message, presumably, found nowhere else in Scripture.

¹ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Ro 3:9–20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Of course Romans 3 is a compilation of Old Testament Scriptures which Paul is using to demonstrate to those conversant with the Scriptures (his Jewish readers in particular), that they had missed an obvious message. It might be worth pointing out that the Old Testament passages Paul quotes to underscore the depravity of man also contain references to the salvation God will provide (Psalm 14:7; 53:6) finding its ultimate consummation in Christ Himself. Man's sin and God's grace is the message of Scripture from cover to cover.

It might also be worth pointing out that Paul offers of crescendo in his description of man's universally depraved condition. He begins with a general statement of man's unrighteousness then moves to man's poisonous lips, culminating with a swiftness to shed blood. So it is not as if man's unwillingness to seek after God is merely some sort of inert sinfulness. The nature of man is as such that his silent unbelief will eventually manifest itself in open and destructive rebellion against God and others. Calvin explains:

For as the best bond of mutual concord among us is the knowledge of God, (as he is the common Father of all, he wonderfully unites us, and without him there is nothing but disunion,) so inhumanity commonly follows where there is ignorance of God, as every one, when he despises others, loves and seeks his own good.²

But it is not my purpose here to launch into a series on the cultural decimation which will inevitably follow the rejection of the grace of God in Christ. I would prefer to follow the reasoning (at least as I understand it) of Paul who is proclaiming the badness of the bad news in order that we might more fully comprehend the goodness of the Good News.

It's not as if those who embrace Total Depravity as an accurate assessment of human nature have some macabre, morbid, gothic fascination with sin. It is more, I would hope, that it is an increased appreciation for the power of Christ to rescue us from the danger of the abyss that we would otherwise be more than willing to jump in.

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 3:12). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

So verses nine through 20 need to be studied with our head on a swivel to verses 21 and 22:

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe (Romans 3:21, 22).

Years ago one of my children was in an automobile accident. When I was notified by phone of what happened, the first words conveyed to me were “She’s alright, but your daughter was in an accident” lest there be even a moment when my heart would sink with fear.

Yet, in order for verses 21 and 22 (and the rest of Romans for that matter) to be fully appreciated, we must seek to fully grasp the axe Paul is putting to the tree of human ability. And since Total Depravity is a doctrine that, in our current culture, has found almost utter rejection among non-Christians and Christians alike, I think it necessary for me to address what Total Depravity is (and is not); what the objections are and what some answers might be to those objections – all that we might more appreciate **“the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.”**

All Under Sin

In the verses before us this morning we learn that all are **“under sin.”** When it comes to some human attribute – whether the attribute be pedigree, ethnicity, ethical maturity or humility, sin has its foot on the neck of mankind to the extent that no group of people or individual person should think they are better or better off than anyone else when it comes to attaining peace with God. Paul answers his own rhetorical question, **“Are we better than they? Not at all”** perhaps, to avoid misunderstanding. Notice also how he includes himself by asking the question in the first person plural.

Paul then proceeds to make his argument from Scripture (Psalm 14; 53; Ecclesiastes 7:20). His opening observation about human nature is that there is **“no one righteous, not one.”** There is a universal censure against the human race. And one consequence of this rebellious condition is that

“there is none who understands.” This doesn’t mean that the natural man understands nothing at all. He understands that if he sticks his hand in boiling oil it will burn or even that if he combines certain chemicals they may heal. But he doesn’t understand the substance or essence of reality; and he certainly doesn’t understand how one might find peace with the God who made him.

In fact he has **“turned aside”** from that God – implying an active rebellion, and in the final analysis he has become **“unprofitable”** in terms of what is truly of value. Finally man, left to his own devices, will simply not do **“good.”** As Paul will later write:

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (Galatians 3:22).

Total Depravity

Since the Scriptures **“imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe”** it might behoove us at this juncture to embark upon a proper understanding of Total Depravity – which we might equate with being **“imprisoned under sin.”** My plan is to chip away at this over the next few weeks as we examine the passage before us. It has been suggested that a proper understanding of Total Depravity will logical (not to mention biblically) necessitate the remaining four principle categories of the well-known TULIP acronym for Calvinism. I don’t intend to go that far in this study. But I hope we will quickly see how important this subject is.

A proper comprehension of the nature of man is as important to understanding salvation as a proper comprehension of the disease is essential to finding the cure. Our understanding of what man can and cannot accomplish according to his own nature will inform how he is approached in terms of religion.

If we can safely draw the conclusion that the human psyche/emotions are still capable of a love for God, then emotional pleas might be preferable and effective; the lighting in the church and a good sound system become even more important.

If we can accurately draw the conclusion that the human mind/will is capability (given sufficient data) of believing godly premises and drawing godly conclusions, then evidences for the existence of God and the cross of Christ become increasingly critical. This of course leaves our conclusions at bay until science has completed all its investigations and has properly arrived at its final and undeniable (or at least probable) truth; this may take a while.

We all know that men make choices. The limits (or lack thereof) of one's ability to make godly choices will inevitably determine how he is approached with the message of salvation. Total Depravity defines those limits. A definition of Total Depravity:

Total Depravity Is/Is Not

What is Total Depravity? Total depravity relates to sin nature and the effects of the fall. It does not mean man is as evil as he can possibly be; he is not the devil. We are not speaking of abject or absolute depravity.

Total depravity does mean that evil pervades every faculty of the soul. The whole of man's being (body, soul, mind, will) is affected by sin; so much so he cannot/will not take one step toward heaven. Total Depravity is not so much intensive but extensive. The natural man can do no spiritual good.

The man who walks in the flesh is still wholly under the control of his fallen nature, the world and Satan. Though the natural man may not behave as poorly as he possibly can all the time, his rejection of Christ makes even his best works reprehensible before God for there is no sense in which his works are designed for the pleasure or obedience of God; his loyalties lie with another god.

A spouse may dress nicely, put on make-up, perfume, cologne, etc. so that they are very pleasing to the eye. They may appear outwardly beautiful to their wife/husband. But if it is found that they are dressing to please another, then we view the behavior as a tribute to infidelity.

The Scriptures and Human Nature

Does the Bible teach Total Depravity as defined above? Some general statements about the sinful nature of man are found in the following passages:

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually (Genesis 6:5).

And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart *is* evil from his youth (Genesis 8:21).

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me (Psalm 51:5).

The wicked are estranged from the womb; They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies (Psalm 58:3).

But we are all like an unclean *thing* And all our righteousnesses *are* like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, And desperately wicked; Who can know it (Jeremiah 17:9)?

Many of these passages are well-known to all. And there is a generally agreement, even among non-Calvinists, that man has a sin nature. But the extent of that sin nature becomes the lynch-pin of our understanding of the doctrines of grace. The Calvinist will assert that anti-Calvinists underestimate the effects of the fall on the will of man.

Able to Respond

We must then ask if fallen man is capable of a positive response to God. Has God left any of this in the hands of man? Many anti-Calvinists

will even agree that God works first; but that He can be resisted. The question then is how much help does fallen man need before God finally leaves him to his own power or decision-making ability? As anti-Calvinist, Laurence Vance aptly states,

...the heart of the matter is whether man has the free will to respond to the word of God and the Holy Spirit *without* being the subject of Unconditional Election and Irresistible Grace.³

Another anti-Calvinist, George Bryson, states that God provides a way for the lost to “**avail themselves of**” of His Grace.”⁴ And finally there is the assertion of Norman Geisler that God “**will do everything within His loving power to save all He can.**” So what is the extent of God’s power?

Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, That it cannot save (Isaiah 59:1).

And if certain men don’t resist the Spirit of God the question must be asked, why? Why do some yield and others resist? What are these independent antecedent forces which determine a destiny of heaven or hell? If God’s grace does not irresistibly win the heart of fallen man, what does? A good upbringing? Fate? Luck? If a proper understanding of sin nature does not reveal that men are completely impotent to act or react to God and His promptings, what is the watershed lying in the soul, or will, of man that grants Him this ability to choose wisely (whether the choice is for God or anything else)? These are some questions we will pursue in our next meeting.

³ Vance, p. 200.

⁴ Bryson, p. 72

Questions for Study

1. In general, what does Romans 3:9-20 appear to be about (pages 2, 3)?
2. Discuss the “crescendo” Paul uses to describe human nature (pages 2, 3).
3. Why should we study Total Depravity? What should we always be aware of as we study Total Depravity (pages 3, 4)?
4. What does it mean that all are “under sin” (pages 4, 5)?
5. How will our understanding of human nature affect the way we present the gospel (pages 5, 6)?
6. Define Total Depravity – what it is and what it is not (pages 6, 7).
7. Discuss man’s ability to respond to the gospel (pages 7, 8).