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Romans

As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one;... Romans 3:10

Today is the start of a rather long set of quotations selected by Paul directly from the Scriptures in order to justify his statements and prove his case. He starts with, "As it is written..." If the Old Testament (the Scriptures of his day) are truly the word of God (and he takes this as an axiom), then what they say is absolute truth and is binding as guidance and instruction.

The verses he selects will continue through verse 18 and come from Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, and Isaiah. They will speak of God in verses 10-12 first as a judge, then in verses 13-15 as an anatomist, and finally in 16-18 as an anthropologist.

Today is a close quote of Ecclesiastes 7:20 -

For there is not a just man on earth who does good
And does not sin.

From the first man, Adam, there has been none who have not sinned. Adam was created as a perfect man, but he lacked the knowledge of good and evil. This was not a flaw, merely a lack. Something lacking something else is not necessarily flawed and we cannot ascribe his innocence as such. In his innocent state, he was

given one command. But, exercising the free will was given, he chose to disobey this command. This became "fault" or as we would term it "sin."

From this one man's sin, sin entered not only the world at large, but into the stream of humanity as well. Sin transfers through man to the next generation and therefore we are born in sin. David understood this when he penned these words

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

The NIV clearly translates this, "Surely I was sinful at birth." All people are born into sin and therefore, "There is none righteous, no, not one."

But this isn't just a philosophical concept of Solomon which is repeated by Paul. Rather, it is a truth born out in the historical record of the Bible as well. In Genesis 4 this truth is highlighted several times. In verses 3 through 5 offerings are brought to the Lord and yet there is no record of Cain or Abel having committed any sin. The Bible therefore implies that because no demonstrable sin was committed, they had inherited their father's fallen state. This concept continues to be born out in Cain's murder of Abel and on through the rest of the Old Testament.

And yet, from the same early pages of the Bible, all the way through to Malachi, there are pictures and promises of One who would come to right the wrong of Adam and thus restore the fellowship that was lost so long ago. Yes, there is none righteous who is born of man. But Jesus wasn't born of man; He was born of the Holy Spirit and through a woman. The sin of Adam didn't transfer to Him.

Life application: Are you doing works in order to please God and get you to heaven? Guess what, it won't work. You have already inherited a problem which works can't fix. You have inherited a nature which infinitely separates you from God. But there is a remedy. By faith, put your trust in Jesus and what He did and He can be your bridge back to a right relationship with His Father. Only then can your works be found pleasing to God.

There is none who understands;

There is none who seeks after God. Romans 3:11

Real care needs to be taken when evaluating quotes in the New Testament which come from the Old. Anybody can quote anything to come to whatever conclusion they wish by tearing things out of context. This is the case with today's verse more often than not. Paul is citing Psalm 14:1 and Psalm 53:1 which are almost a mirror of each other in their first verse.

If taken at face value, and without considering both the context and the rest of Scripture, then one might come to the conclusion that "Man in his natural state cannot seek God" or something similar to this. This is the standard conclusion of Calvinist doctrine as well as some others, especially among those who deny the free will of man in accepting or rejecting Jesus. However, this is wrong.

Taking the verse in proper context as Paul would have expected his readers to do, we see the basis for the original statement which was made by David in the psalms -

The fool has said in his heart,
"There is no God."
They are corrupt,

They have done abominable works,
There is none who does good.

David had in mind, and was speaking of, the atheist - "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" To make an all-inclusive claim about this verse as Calvinism does is to completely tear it out of its original context. We could question, "Are Muslims seeking after God?" "Are Mormons seeking after God?" "Are Buddhists seeking after God?" The answer in each case is "Yes. They are just doing it wrong." Further, if Calvinism were true and this were an all inclusive statement, then David couldn't have even written the psalm because "none" would include him. Such a conclusion is entirely unsupportable by the rest of Scripture.

Enoch who is recorded in Genesis 5 "walked with God; and he was not, for God took him." (v. 24). Ruth, a young girl from the pagan nation of Moab refused to be separated from her mother-in-law and stated,

"...wherever you go, I will go;
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God." Ruth 1:16

Speaking of a time, yet future, Hosea prophesied that the Israelites who had long rejected God will search Him out in the latter days -

"Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They shall fear the Lord and His goodness in the latter days."
Hosea 3:5

Those who seek after God, from both within the covenant people of Israel and those from without, are noted time and time again Scripture. Therefore, that this verse today is not "all inclusive" is as evident as water is wet.

Having determined this we can acknowledge that there is "none who understands" God in the fullest sense. If they did, they would be God because only God who is infinite can fully know Himself. It is also true that without His special revelation to us "there is none who seeks after God" perfectly. To perfectly seek after God would imply a perfect knowledge of how to do so. But, in His wisdom, God sent us Jesus to reveal the Father in a way which we can understand. When we look to Jesus, we see the Father (John 14:7).

By showing us who the Father is, we now have the ability to properly pursue God and to accurately understand Him as He continually, ceaselessly is revealed by the Son. It will be an eternal adventure for us if we are willing to start the trip. Jesus offers any to come unto Him and when they do the journey begins. It is not forced upon us, nor are we first "regenerated" in order to accept the offer as those who deny free will must claim. Rather, we are given the free-will to choose and the mental faculties to make the choice.

Life Application: The fact that God already knows what we will choose in no way negates our responsibility in the matter. Don't be the fool David wrote about and whom Paul analyzes in today's verse. Rather, think it through and understand that God has given us all we need in order to make the right decision. Now it is up to each of us to do so. Choose life. Choose Jesus.

They have all turned aside;

They have together become unprofitable;

There is none who does good, no, not one." Romans 3:12

This verse, taken from Psalm 14:1 and Psalm 53:1, is to be taken in a general sense. The gentile has turned away from the natural revelation given by God which is written in our hearts and consciences. The Jew has turned away from the special revelation he has been given by God and toward apostasy. Paul has shown this in the chapters and verses leading up to this conclusion. Because the Jew has the natural revelation and also the special revelation and yet they still turn from God, it shows the truly depraved nature of man.

And so, both Jew and gentile have "together become unprofitable." The Greek of this word is echreothesan. It has been variously translated as worthless, useless, completely useless, unprofitable, rejected, rotten to the core, corrupt, etc. The word from which it stems in the Hebrew has the idea of something offensive or putrid. The corresponding word in Arabic is used to describe sour milk. In man, it is the state of moral impurity which is vile and degraded.

Because of these things, the result is that "there is none who does good, no, not one." As noted in the previous verse, care needs to be exercised here. The portion of the psalm being quoted is specifically speaking of the atheist - "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" It would be contradictory to Scripture, even Paul's writings, and yes even the book of Romans and the very thoughts which he is presenting, to apply this to all people in an absolute sense. For example in Romans 2:14, 15 Paul shows that there are gentiles who "by nature do the things in the law." He then explains this and other notable traits throughout the rest of chapter 2. This must, by definition, be considered as "good."

So Paul is clearly not saying, as Calvinism claims, that man is entirely incapable of doing good or seeking after God. Rather, this is the general, not absolute, tendency of man. Having said this, when Paul writes, "there is none who does good, no, not one" it isn't at all contradictory. The sin in man - both inherited from Adam and committed personally, places a barrier between God and man. It is impossible for man to please God unless the sin is dealt with first. And so truly, "there is none who does good, no, not one."

Making the leap from not being good to not being capable of doing good is a category mistake. There may be nothing good in us, but this does not mean we cannot see the good in God (or in His revelation of Himself - either natural or special) and pursue it. We see the good in Him and either choose or reject that. Is it the confused soul who says that man has free will to commit evil, but denies the free will to pursue what is good, even if erringly.

Life application: Ideas, concepts, biblical truths, evaluations of man's relationship with God, etc. all have individual categories which must be kept separate and distinct. When we take one concept from the Bible and inappropriately apply it to, or over, another our thinking on what is biblically correct becomes skewed. Keep the boxes straight and fix your eyes on Jesus.