

LESSONS ON PREDESTINATION #14
"Total Inability: The Goodness & Severity of God"
(Scriptures from NKJV)

NOTE: Much of the text herein is quoted directly or paraphrased from the book, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* by Lorraine Boettner.

Today's lesson will be the continuation of the series on Predestination and will be number 14 in that series. The title of this lesson is "The Goodness and Severity of God." We are under the subheading of Total Inability or Total Depravity. Before we begin this morning I would like to read a text from Isaiah 28:9-10 to set forth how we are approaching this lesson and how I believe it is the best way to learn the Bible.

Whom will he teach knowledge? And whom will he make to understand the message [KJV-understand doctrine]? Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts? For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, Line upon line, line upon line, Here a little, there a little.

That is, a little bit of understanding here, added to the next, to the next, to the next and you are growing in grace and knowledge of Christ. This is the way that we are approaching this study, in that we are taking it in a chronological fashion where each lesson serves as an individual lesson, that is an advancement like a chapter in a book. Each chapter or lesson is adding to what has been previously taught in lessons. So all of this, whether you are realizing it or not, is adding to your accumulation of knowledge and understanding, and it is enabling us to correct mistakes and also to set forth that which is found in the word of God.

Now then lets go to the Book of Romans for the theme text from which we are taking the title of our lesson today. Turn to Romans 11:20-22, and we are going to look at verse 22 for the theme text of The Goodness and Severity of God.

Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.

Here we have the contrast between two attributes of God. The goodness of God and the severity of God. It is my conviction that one of the major problems that exists in contemporary Christianity, at least here in the United States, is an unbalanced presentation of the being of God. There have been eras in church history in which churches and ministers have over emphasized the severity of God to the exclusion of the love of God. But in the last 50 or 60 years, with the influence of liberalism and universalism, the emphasis has been shifted to the love of God to the exclusion of the wrath or severity of God. However, there is a tendency today on the part of those on the other side to try to swing back in the other direction and not give an adequate presentation in the Bible of the

doctrine of God's love. That is, in order to try to counterbalance the over emphasis on love, there is a tendency on the other side's part is to just emphasize the severity and the wrath of God. The Scriptures do neither, but give a balanced presentation emphasizing both the goodness of God and the severity of God.

Now in our survey of the fall and its extent, we have found that it is most humiliating to human pride. It proves to man that all his claims of goodness are unfounded, **"there is none righteous, no not one."** (Romans 3:10). It shows man that his only hope is in the sovereign grace of Almighty God. That is a survey of that which we have concluded in the previous lessons. Precept upon precept, here and little, there a little has brought us to see that if these things are true, then we are brought low and humbled before a sovereign God. Our only hope in salvation is not in our goodness, but in his sovereign mercy toward us. The so-called "graciously restored ability," of which the Arminian system talks about, is not consistent with the facts of Scripture. The Scriptures, history, and Christian experience by no means warrant such a favorable view of the natural moral condition of man as the Arminian system teaches. It emphasizes at best that man is a sinner, but he still has some goodness left in him, either by natural birth, or else a so-called restored ability that God gives him at birth. So that man still has issues within his nature that are good. But I repeat that the Scriptures do not declare that. It is sort of a mirage. On the contrary, the Scriptures gives each of these, (that is Scripture, history and Christian experience) a very gloomy picture of a fearful corruption and universal inclination to evil on the part of man, which can only be overcome by the intervention of divine grace. May I repeat that again? The Scriptures tell us that man is inclined to sin, and that this inclination is to such a degree that it can only be overcome by the sovereign grace of God. That is the picture of man. My wife showed me a statement this morning by Augustine regarding the will of man and I paraphrase it, "To will is natural, to will what is right is gracious." To "will" comes from natural birth, but to "will the right" comes from God's grace. So yes, man has a will, but he will not choose that which is good in the sight of God without an inclination given him in regenerating grace.

The Calvinistic system teaches a far deeper fall into sin and a far more glorious manifestation of redeeming grace. From these depths, the Christian is led to despair of himself, to throw himself unconditionally into the arms of God, and to lay hold on unmerited grace, which alone can save him. Do we see then that in coming to Christ, a person must be brought down low before he is going to be raised up. If a person still resides with self-confidence and self-righteousness, that he is good enough to pass the test, then he has not yet been shown the grace of God and his real estate.

We should see God's mercy in the Scriptures and also His severity in the realms of the

spiritual and the physical as well. When we look at life, life is full of hard facts which, unpleasant though they may be, must simply be faced and admitted. It is not an easy journey. Throughout the Scriptures, and especially in the words of Christ Himself, the final torments of the wicked in hell are described in such ways as to show us that they are indescribably awful. There is hardly a day that goes by in my life but what I see on the internet or a magazine article, or come across it in person, in which articles are being bombarded toward us opposing the idea that God is wrathful or that God hates anybody. If you teach such things, you are viewed as an enemy of God. This past week on the internet there was an article about how awful it was that Franklin Graham states that God hates somebody. The articles said, "How unbecoming, how unloving, how un-Christian is this!" There is a battle going on today over what is Christianity. Without exception, all of these articles do not make appeal to the Bible. They just start out with the presumption that God is a God of love, and it flows from there. Anything that does not fit into that grid is unbecoming of God. Of course, the individuals who write these articles obviously have not read the Bible or have just ignored it. ***"Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated."*** (Romans 9:13). That is in the Bible is it not? What it may mean may involve some further study and understanding, but it is stated there. God hates the workers of iniquity. He has a severe opposition to sin and the workers of sin.

Just in the Gospel of Matthew alone, we will look at a few verses from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ as He describes the eternal torment and destiny of the unconverted. Follow with me to Matthew chapter 5 and the words of Jesus in verses 29 and 30 - ***"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."*** Our Lord Jesus Christ taught the reality of hell in the afterlife. ***"And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."*** Of course this is metaphoric language setting forth the doctrine of mortification. It is not referring to a physical act, but is setting forth that if a person is going to deal with sin, he or she must deal with it severely. You can cut out your eye and still have lustful thoughts. That is not going to get it, but it is showing that it takes extreme measures to deal with sin. And if sin isn't dealt with, the end result is hell according to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 7:19 - ***"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."***

Matthew 10:28 - ***"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."*** This is not

teaching annihilation as the annihilationist teaches. It is merely emphasizing that spiritual destruction takes place and comes from God, not men. Only God has the ability and the right power and wisdom to assign the wicked to hell. It is interesting to take the Book of Matthew and see how many references are given to the doctrine of hell by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 25:30 - ***"And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*** It is interesting that we have two images of eternal punishment in the Bible--a lake of fire and outer darkness. How do you have outer darkness and a lake of fire at the same time and the same place? How we have pushed the literalness or the physicalness of it is unclear. A lake of fire has light, outer darkness has none. Both of these are describing the reality of physical and mental torment in hell, and then the reality of a mental state in which you are cut off from any reference point. I am experiencing vertigo in my life right now, and it is difficult at times to get a reference point when your head is spinning. The wicked in hell will have no reference point, no north, south, east or west. No reference point from the past to the present or to the future. This is what is meant by total darkness. That is a state of mind. You talk about mental illness, that is it. That is the ultimate of hell's experience. It is not only a physical suffering, but a mental state of total despair, no hope of it ever improving and constantly getting worse and worse, and worse, and worse as eternity and its ages roll on.

Matthew 25:41 - ***"Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'" Yes, men are going to be there as well as angelic beings.***

Speaking of Judas, Matthew 26:24 - ***"The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born."***

These are just a few of the selected verses in Matthew relating to Christ's view on the afterlife showing forth the severity of God. Now surely such a doctrine which receives such emphasis from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself cannot be passed over in silence, distasteful though it may be. Listen carefully to this concept which is very striking. In the next world with all restraint removed, the wicked will go headlong into sin, blaspheming and cursing God, growing worse and worse as they sink deeper and deeper into the bottomless pit. You have heard the expression of the bottomless pit. What in the world is its meaning? It means hell is getting worse and worse for the inhabitants therein, and that because the individuals continue to sin against God in an unrestrained fashion, they sink deeper into the sufferings of mind and body. Endless punishment is the penalty for ENDLESS sinning. So

now we have the idea that the wicked are confirmed in hell and sin and that is all there is. No, they will continue endlessly sinning against God, their Creator. They will be cut off from any comfort in the Creator and any comfort in the creation - not even a drop of water. They have absolutely no comfort, and they blame it on their Creator. So endless sinning brings on endless suffering. Behold the severity of God. Now as I say, this is humbling. This is not a tasteful subject, but it is a Biblical subject. To undo it, is to only bring ruin to the great design of redemption in Jesus Christ. If, as some teach, the wicked will be annihilated, that would be an act of mercy, but Christ never taught that. Endless punishment is the penalty for endless sinning. Furthermore, this is hard for today's religious people to swallow, it is as much the glory of God that He punishes the wicked as that He rewards the righteous. Much of the easy-going indifference toward Christianity in our day is due to the failure of Christian ministers to emphasize these doctrines which Christ taught so repeatedly. I said earlier that this life which we live in is a severe life in what we face. As we look at life, it is full of hard facts. In the physical realm, we see God's severity in wars, famines, floods, disasters, diseases, sufferings, death and crimes of all kind which come upon the just and the unjust alike. These are hard facts, and all of these exist in a world which is under the complete control of God who is infinite in all of His perfections or His attributes. What does today's religious world, that is so unbalanced, do in an attempt to explain the hard fact of war. How can a God of love allow war and all of its sufferings? What about famines in Africa or the floods that we read about in various parts of the world? Also, how can God permit disasters, tornados, hurricanes, diseases, sufferings of mind and body, horrible deaths, and crimes. Hardly a week goes by without a mass shooting somewhere. How can that be existing at the same time that there is a loving God? So when the media asks about this, how does the religious world explain these things? Say a hurricane hits the gulf down here, and the media goes to the ministers and asks, how do we explain this? How do the ministers explain it? They say it wasn't God who did this. So do you see what is being done? It is separating the severity of hard facts from the being of God who is supposedly in control of all things. So you end up limiting the infinite perfections of God. You have got to get Him out of the picture and say, "Well, God had absolutely nothing to do with that." It is a rare case today to find ministers who will have the courage to say, "here is what the Bible says about this, that while there are secondary causes in all of these things, behind it all, there is a God who rules and reigns." That is hard doctrine, but that is Biblical doctrine. So when Paul says in Romans 11:22, **"Behold then the goodness and severity of God,"** we must look at both of these. Look how God is good as He sends forth rain upon the just and the unjust (cf. Matthew 5:45); how He sends forth His Son to die on the cross, not for His own sins, but the sins of others; and how He calls His own people out of the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God's dear Son. If you are saved today, you ought to bow down and honor the goodness of God, saying, "I am what I am by the grace of God, not because I deserved it, not because I did something, but

because of what Christ did in my place.”

You must also look at the severity of God, and see that His severity is equally set forth in Scripture, which gives a balanced presentation. Natural theology, known as Naturalism or humanism, does justice to neither of these. It separates itself from the severity of God by isolating itself and saying that “Mother Nature” did this, and this is just a natural course of events. Natural theology cannot explain anything about the love of God. So what conclusion does that eventually cause the person or the church that holds to natural theology, to arrive at? It moves from what is known as Theism into Deism. What is Deism? God created all the laws of nature in motion and backed away and let it alone. Many of our founding fathers that we sometimes look to as devout Christians were not devout Christians but Deists. They separate God from all activity so that He is not accountable for what is severity. However, neither does that system provide any answer about whether He is a God of love. It can’t answer either of these attributes. Arminianism or Semi-Pelagianism magnifies the first of these attributes but neglects the second. It emphasizes the love of God, but minimizes the severity of God. Calvinism is the only system which does justice to both - that God is a good God, and God is a severe God. Calvinism alone adequately sets forth the facts in regard to the eternal and infinite love of God which caused Him to provide redemption for His people, even at the great cost of sending His only begotten Son to die on the cross; and it also emphasizes the awful abyss which exists between sinful man and the holy God. It is true that the Bible says “God is love,” but along with this must be placed the other statement that **“our God is a consuming fire,”** Hebrews 12:29. You hear the statement, “the God of the Old Testament was a different God than the God of the New Testament. The God of the Old Testament was a God of wrath, but now that Jesus has come, God has become a God of love.” In the New Testament book of Hebrews it does not say, “our God WAS a flaming fire, but our God IS a flaming fire. God cannot change. If He did, He would have to change for the better or the worse. In either case it indicates that something was wrong to start with. He doesn’t have to change. Any system of theology which omits or under-emphasizes either of these truths will be a mutilated system, no matter how plausible it may sound to men. Notice the statement, “Any system which omits or under emphasizes either of these - the love or the severity of God, if you sit under that system, you will be exposed to a mutilated system. I don’t know that any of you have ever followed a minister who has emphasized the love of God to the exclusion of the severity of God. You may have been spared that. I don’t know if any of you have ever followed a minister that over-emphasized the severity and the wrath of God to the exclusion of the love of God. But the Bible teaches both. On the freewill side, you have those who overemphasize the love of God. In the hyper-Calvinist side, you have those who overemphasize the severity of God to the de-emphasis of the love of God. It seems as if some brethren have the idea that if you preached on the love of God, it might give the

indication that you might be an Arminian, and that is not the case. It requires a balance system. A Scripture is coming to my mind. Let me chase a rabbit here just a moment. Look in Ephesians 3:14-21. This is one of the prayers of Paul, and it is one of my prayers for you, as I come to teach here in this class. ***"For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."***

Last week between Sunday School and Church one of our ladies approached me and said, "Bro. Gables, you have been bringing us some very deep stuff. Even though I have sat under this most of my life, at times I have difficulty in comprehending what you are saying." My brother, here to my right, remarks that he is not an educated person and that at times he has difficulty following these concepts. What do they both need? They need prayer that God would expand their understanding, that they may see all the length, depth, height, and the width of the love of God in Christ Jesus, how good He has been. That is what you need, and that doesn't come just by natural revelation, it comes through your own prayer and on the part of others. Paul is praying that this is what I want you to see here at the church at Ephesus. He said, this is why I am here, and what doctrine does he introduce at the start of the book of Ephesians? He begins with election and predestination. Some will say, "Well, you ought to hide that doctrine and wait until they can absorb John 3:16." If you have the right understanding of John 3:16, you will rightly understand election and predestination. They are not contradictory. Oh my, what a text, ***"that you may be able to comprehend the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

This doctrine of the Total Inability of man is terribly stern, severe, and forbidding. If you mention these words from the era of the Puritans, what kind of response will you get? What does the typical American say who understands what a Puritan was? They say, "Oh, I see that you have read the Puritans." Their response will be totally opposite to what the Puritans held and stood for. They state that the Puritans were stern, hard, unloving men. The Puritans believed that they ought to stay within the Church of England to reform and purify it. The separatists said that the Church was too far gone, and wanted to come out and form new churches. Yes, they were stern men, but never has there been a generation of pastors in the history of the Christian church that exhibited more pastoral care, visitation in the homes, doing one on one consultation and instruction as well as in the pulpit as those who made up the Puritans. However, I agree, when you talk about the total depravity of

man, you are dealing with a stern, severe and forbidding truth. But it is to be remembered that we are not at liberty to develop a new system suited to our liking. And this is what contemporary Christianity is doing. It is developing a new system which wants to hold onto the name and the honor associated with it, but it doesn't want Apostolic doctrine. Therefore, it separates itself from the doctrine of the Apostles, and in essence, has become a new form of Gnosticism - stating that they have a higher knowledge than you Bible believers. They believe they have advanced beyond what the Bible has to say, acknowledging that Paul and the Apostles believed what they taught was true, but now they have come to see that it really wasn't true. They assert that with their advanced knowledge, they don't really need the Bible, because they have a continuing revelation. If you combine that on the intellectual side with the charismatics on the other side, who say that basically we don't need a Bible, because the Spirit teaches us directly, you are undermining the foundation of Apostolic doctrine and teaching. **"If the foundations are destroyed, What can the righteous do?"** (Psalm 11:3).

We must take the facts as we find them. Such exhibitions of the true state of mankind are, of course, offensive to unregenerate men generally; and many have tried to find a system of doctrines more acceptable to the modern mind. That is being done today. Paul warned about this to Timothy and Titus when he said for them to stay away from those **"having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof."** (I Timothy 3:5). Then in Romans 1:16, Paul said that the gospel is **"the power of God unto salvation."** That is what contemporary Christianity has slipped into when they deny Apostolic doctrine. Paul described in the book of Galatians that it comes under the category of "another gospel," "another Jesus" and "another Spirit." Contemporary Christianity is asking us to redefine all of these doctrines. The state of fallen man is such that he readily listens to any theory which makes him even partly independent of God; he wishes to be the master of his fate and the captain of his soul. The lost, ruined, and helpless state of the sinner needs to be constantly set before him; for until he is brought to feel it, he will never seek help where alone it is to be found. That is why churches don't deal with the doctrine of total inability and move on to other things. It is something we have to constantly keep before our hearers, but also before our own minds. We have to keep ourselves aware that **"there is none that does good, no, not one!"** (Romans 3:12). Apart from God working in us, there is not going to be any good outcome. **"We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags."** (Isaiah 64:6). That is not just in our unregenerate state. We get to thinking that we have become pretty good now that we know something. No, we have to keep this doctrine continually before us, because if we don't, we will lose appreciation of the redemptive work of Christ. The doctrine of total inability is the black cloth against which the doctrine of grace shines. Go into a jewelry store, and when they want to show women how the diamonds glitter, what do they put it up against? A white

piece of paper? No, a dark background, mostly black velvet. If you want to see the glitter in the gospel, it must be placed in the setting of the darkness of human nature, the darkness of man's heart. Men don't like that, and that is why they don't like the gospel either, because it humbles them. Man is carnal and sold under sin. He is not only without power or ability, but without inclination to move toward God; and what is more awful still, he is an actual rebel, a presumptuous, blasphemous rival of the Great God who is the Creator of all. Now, tell the average person around the dinner table, that is what they are if they are not a Christian. How would you be accepted? You would not be welcomed.

This doctrine of Total Inability, or Original Sin, has been treated at some length in this series of lessons in order to set forth the fundamental basis upon which the doctrine of Predestination rests. This side of the picture is dark, very dark indeed; but its supplement is the glory of God in redemption. Each of these truths, the goodness of God and the severity of God, must be seen in its true light before the other can adequately be appreciated.