

Sermons through

Romans

Total Depravity

Part 2

Romans 3:9-20

With Study Questions

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11/25/2012*

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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.

(Romans 3:9-20).

Introduction

We finished last time asking the questions:

- Why is it that certain people do not resist the Spirit of God?
- 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? Is it a good upbringing? Is it fate? Is it 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?

Review

Romans 3:10-18 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 concerning the depravity of man—a depravity that crescendos from indifference to God to deceitful lips (no doubt to justify/rationalize that indifference, culminating with a swiftness to shed blood. The nature of man is as such that his silent unbelief will eventually manifest itself in open and destructive rebellion against God and others.

Paul appears here to be proclaiming the badness of the bad news in order that we might more fully comprehend and appreciate the goodness of the Good News. We must know from what we have been rescued—the devil, the world and our own flesh—the third in this case being Paul’s focus.

Verses nine through 20 need to be studied in light of verses 21 and 22 which teach of “the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ.”

Paul taught in verses nine and 10 that all are **“under sin”** **“No one (is) righteous, not one...there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God.”** We didn’t speak a great deal on the statement that there is **“none who seeks after God”** but it is a bit of a shocking statement. Not to overstate the issue, but in our current sub-series on Total Depravity, we’re drawn the reasonable conclusion that our understanding of human nature will determine in large part our ministerial approach.

We are told here that no one seeks after God, yet many churches building their entire ministerial system upon the notion of seekers—seeker-centered or seeker-sensitive churches. Not that churches should ignore or be insensitive to visitors, but it often goes beyond mere sensitivity to someone who may not completely grasp the message or event of church.¹ That

¹ There is a difference between seeker-centered and user-friendly.

methodology makes a false assumption about the nature of the visitor and that false assumption often influences church itself.

Not only is there no true seeker, Paul informs us that all have **“turned aside”** from the very God we mistakenly assume people seek and therefore have 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, that the Scriptures **“imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (Galatians 3:22).**

Being **“imprisoned under sin”** (I think it is safe to say) is synonymous with Total Depravity. This appears to be Paul’s point in this chapter (if not the first three chapters of Romans) so we are currently chipping away at the very unpopular, yet critical, notion of Total Depravity. But first, let us look at verses 13 and 14 as they testify of the verbal consequences of turning away from the knowledge of God.

“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” (Romans 3:13, 14).

Open Tombs...Poisonous Lips

The particular tomb of the human throat is not a sealed tomb but an open one—beckoning for more inhabitants to join them in that chamber of death. This reference from Psalm 5:

For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue (Psalm 5:9).

The particular method the Psalmist refers to here is flattery—which probably accomplishes much more than we are willing to admit. This open grave may look more like a party in your honor than a tomb, yet when the door shuts behind you it contains the horrors of hell. Paul then calls on Psalm 140:

They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's, and under their lips is the venom of asps (Psalm 140:3).

One is tempted here to launch into the numerous ways meaningless dialogue pervades our current culture—from movie scripts to political debates. Suffice it to say people can be slick in their verbal discourse and the bite of an asp does much less damage than the venom once it enters the system. So far from being bit by serpents, Christ calls us to be as wise as serpents, yet as innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16). Jesus also taught that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34). We need to be careful that we are not influenced by the serpent's tongue, for if we are, we most assuredly will reproduce that venom in our hearts and words.

Paul writes that the mouth of the man, left to his own devices is **“full of cursing and bitterness.”** “Cursing” *aras* meaning to wish evil against and “bitterness” *pikrias* meaning to resent hate. By contrast Proverbs teach:

The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense (Proverbs 10:21).

And the apex of that contrast will be presented by Paul in a later chapter, where he will again quote from the Old Testament (Isaiah 52:7):

How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things (Romans 10:15)!

Total Depravity Continued

This brings us back to our study of Total Depravity—recognizing that God has determined what words—what message—is to be used to break the heart of man and redeem this fallen creature. As mentioned last time, 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. This makes a definition of Total Depravity essential to ministerial faithfulness.

In our last meeting we defined Total Depravity—it is not that man is as evil as he can be, but sin 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. The natural man can do no spiritual good. We gave numerous passages to demonstrate that biblically incontrovertible fact. Of course those Christians (non-Christians as well) who resist a reformed understanding of Total Depravity have those passages in their Bibles as well. But, as mentioned last time, they arrive elsewhere in their understanding of human nature, especially as it relates to man’s ability to respond to God. Along with this there is, of course, enormous disagreement on the nature of God as well—as pointed out in the following quotations:

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.²

Another anti-Calvinist, George Bryson, states that God provides a way for the lost to “**avail themselves of**” of His Grace.”³ And finally Norman Geisler teaches that God “**will do everything within His loving power to save all He can.**”

Vance implies that it is free will to respond to God; Bryson suggests that man must avail themselves of God’s grace; Geisler teaches that God does everything He can. What is clear in all of these views (and the many variations thereof) is that man, and not God, is the final determiner of his own destiny.

I would like to conclude this morning’s treatment of Total Depravity with a brief examination of some of the options given in answer to the final question in our introduction:

² Vance, p. 200.

³ Bryson, p. 72

- 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?

Seldom does one find anti-Calvinists willing to answer that question. It might be of interest here to consider some alternatives.

Fatalism⁴ of the Materialist, Atheist

Our first option is one that would cause most Christians to recoil—yet it becomes, in one way or another, the *de facto* conclusion of many within the church.

This option is the fatalism that accompanies materialist atheism. Along the lines of Thomas Hobbes, fatalistic, materialistic atheism proposes that we are all merely matter in motion—molecules falling through space. They have great respect for the laws of physics—except, of course, for their insistence that from eternity past there somehow existed the materials for a potential explosion. The problem is multiplied with the particular law of physics which state that a stationery object will remain stationery until acted upon by an outside force. This potential explosion should never have happened⁵.

All of the sudden on a Thursday at 2:30 in the afternoon the laws of physics were violated (sounds like a miracle to me) and this material exploded. This, of course, leads to fatalism for how can we go in any direction other than the one we been blown into by these initial causal forces? There is no free will at all in the view of the materialist. We have no more freedom to choose this or that than an avalanche has the freedom to choose to rumble down the side of the mountain.

The Fatalism of Libertarian Free Will

⁴ The belief that events are determined by an impersonal fate and cannot be changed by human beings.

⁵ Not to mention no explanation for where the objects came from in the first place.

Second, we have the theist who believes that God has chosen not to tamper with the will of man. This is known as *Libertarian Free Will*. This, they say, is God's way of respecting man. Of course I would much rather God disrespect me than spend eternity in hell. Be that as it may, this differs little from the atheist/materialist, resulting in fatalism. One still must give an account for those independent antecedent causes which yield faith in some and rebellion in others.

And if it is not God who subdues the will of rebellious man then what is? Since God created the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), presumably with a perfect notion of what would take place in His world, can God's providence be subtracted from the antecedent causes? In other words, even in this scenario, did not God put in motion those events which would inevitably lead to the rebel seeing, or not seeing, the error of his way? It doesn't take too much ciphering to see that this view does not protect free will either.

It also doesn't take too much ciphering to recognize that in both these somewhat naturalistic views, it does not make sense to hold men accountable for their actions. We see this lived out in today's naturalistic legislative climate where people are being granted immunity because it can be shown that their crime was the inevitable result of their past.

The Unmoved Mover

Strong thinkers, capable of calculating the necessary infinite regress⁶ of their positions are valuable resources when it comes to examining these types of subjects. One such strong thinker is J. P. Moreland. The conclusion he draws, however, is chilling.

Libertarians agree that event-event causation is the correct way to account for normal events in the natural world, like bricks breaking glasses. But when it comes to the free acts of persons, the person, as a substance and an agent directly

⁶ An examination of where a certain proposition will inevitably lead us.

produces the effect. Persons are agents and, as such, in free acts they either cause their acts for the sake of reasons (called agent causation) or their acts are simply uncaused events they spontaneously do by exercising their powers for the sake of reasons (called a noncausal theory of agency). Either way, persons are seen as first causes, unmoved movers who have the power to exercise the ability to act as the ultimate originators of their actions. It is the I, the self that acts; not a state in the self that causes a moving of some kind. Libertarians claim that their view makes sense of the difference between actions (expressed by the active voice, e.g., Jones raised his hand to vote) and mere happenings (expressed by the passive voice, e.g., a raising of the hand was caused by a desiring to vote, which was caused by x, ...).⁷

This is unsettling when one considers that the “unmoved mover” was Aristotle’s definition of God. When your infinite regress lands man’s will as that which has been philosophically and historically defined as divine, you may wish to change your premise. We haven’t time to engage all the options. There are numerous forms of Arminianism (Foreknowledge, Molinism, Pelagianism, etc) but they all run into the same problem in terms of establishing a first cause.

What is the true first cause of man’s redemption? In light of man’s nature, what will Paul (and the rest of Scripture for the matter) describe as the ultimate source of our hope? And in light of that, what will Scripture prescribe as the means by which that hope is accessed? These we will discuss as we continue next time.

⁷ <http://afterall.net/index.php/papers/490579>

Questions for Study

1. Review Romans 3:10-18. What was the obvious message Paul's readers had missed? How are we to understand the nature of man? Why is it important to understand the badness of the bad news? What are some other observations made (pages 3, 4)?
2. How can lips be like an open tomb (pages 4, 5)?
3. What kind of poison is found under the lips of sinful people (pages 4, 5)?
4. Compare the lips of sinfulness versus the beautiful feet of which Paul writes (page 5).
5. Review what has been said about what Total Depravity is/is not (pages 5, 6).

6. You've read some quotes from Christian writers who don't believe in Total Depravity as defined by the reformers. What are the merits or weaknesses of their position (page 6)?
7. What is fatalism and how can it be seen in varying forms of "free will" (pages 7, 8)?
8. Discuss the will of man as the "unmoved mover" (page 8).