

Sermons through

Romans

Total Depravity

Part 3

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;*” ¹¹*There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God.* ¹²*They 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;*” ¹⁶*Destruction 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).*

Review

In Romans 3:10-18 the Apostle Paul provides a series of Old Testament Scriptures 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.

Why might the Scriptures contain such an indictment against the human race? 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. In order for our hearts to turn to that which is capable, it helps for us to know of that which is incapable—especially as it relates to redemption.

Romans 3:9-20 needs 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 9 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.”** He also made the shocking statement that there is **“none who seeks after God.”** Not to overstate the issue, but in our current sub-series on Total Depravity, it seems reasonable to conclude that our understanding of human nature plays a significant role in a wide variety of issues: Our ministerial approach; our own humility before man and God; the elevation of our worship of God for, as John Newton wrote, having **“saved a wretch me.”**

We are informed that no one seeks after God, yet many churches build their entire ministerial system (both in worship and theology) 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 a visitor. When a methodology makes a false assumption about the nature of the man it will often make false assumptions about church or Christianity itself.

We see a message in many churches and para-church organizations which assume an ability or willingness on the part of the natural man that is at odds with what Paul presents here. It is safe to say that many of our interpersonal issues with our neighbors and family (which so often flow from a sense of entitlement) stem from an unwillingness to be honest and grateful about what we deserve and have been delivered from as sinners. Our very approach to worship and what it should consist of and look like will be severely altered based upon our understanding of human nature as we interact with a holy God.

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. Man, left to his own devices, simply will not do **“good.”** As Paul later writes, that the Scriptures (that is, the message of 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. Again, Paul, in this crescendo of man’s depravity moves from silent indifference to the verbal consequences of turning away from the knowledge of God. This is seen in verses 13 and 14 where he compares man’s throat to an open tomb; tongues that practice deceit; poison under the lips and mouths full of cursing and bitterness.

Therefore, what is to be expected from the natural man is not merely silent rebellion. As men live out their depraved estate, they will seek to justify their thoughts and deeds through the means of deceit. They will also viciously castigate the things of God and those who believe in those things; a practice, sadly, observed with great regularity in the apostate culture in which we live.

Christians should not be discouraged when they find themselves surrounded by this behavior. Also, and perhaps more importantly, we should not allow ourselves to be persuaded by the deceit but rather

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful (Hebrews 10:23).

Paul will later present the great contrast to the deceitful lips, 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)!

But Paul is not through. The silent indifference which escalates to deceit climbs yet another rung on the ladder of darkness.

“Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ Destruction 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” (Romans 3:15-17).

Swift to Shed Blood

This quotation from Isaiah 59:7 has a full and stunning context. Along with feet running to evil and swiftness to shed blood (verse 7); the passage in Isaiah speaks of the absence of justice (verses 8, 9); the multiplication of our transgressions, the knowledge of our own iniquity and how it testifies against us in the denying of the Lord and the turning back from following our God (verses 12, 13); how truth stumbles in the public squares and that uprightness cannot enter (verse 14); that he who departs from evil makes himself a prey—in other words, it is going to be very difficult to do the right thing (verse 15).

How many throughout the course of history have seen this played out in severe detail? Yet even in the Old Testament passage, some 700 years before the birth of Christ, we see the gospel, we see Christ!

Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. ¹⁶ He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. ¹⁷ He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. ¹⁸ According to their deeds, so will he repay, wrath to his adversaries, repayment to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render repayment. ¹⁹ So they shall fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the LORD drives. ²⁰ “And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,” declares the LORD ²¹ “As for Me,” says the Lord, “this *is* My covenant with them: My Spirit who *is* upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your

descendants’ descendants,” says the Lord, “from this time and forevermore” (Isaiah 59:15-21).

Both in the Old and New Testaments the testimony of man’s sinfulness is accompanied by the testimony of God’s faithfulness, justice and mercy. The only ones who will stand in judgment are the ones who, by faith, find themselves united to and hidden in the Judge Himself.

By concise definition, Paul is teaching that human beings, left to their own devices, will become murderous with the slightest provocation—respect for human life becomes meaningless or miniscule. By “**destruction and misery**” *syntrimma* and *talaiporia* he is not referring to a personal or emotional experience of unhappiness (though it may certainly include that) but to a desire to inflict others. And when we read “**the way of peace they have no known**” as Thomas Schreiner explains, it...

...is not a comment on the anxiety and turbulence dwelling in their hearts. Rather, the violent and savage behavior of human beings.¹

Schreiner continues in his explanation of man’s lack of fear of God:

No Fear of God

Sin is fundamentally theological in nature, but it has terrible sociological consequences. The barbarity of human beings to one another is ultimately explicable by a rejection of God and the failure to fear and honor him.²

¹ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (166-167). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

² Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (167). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Paul writes that man has no **“fear of God before his eyes.”** This virtue of the fear of God, this analysis of human nature is often scoffed at by those raised within the comfortable borders of a nation such as ours, founded on strong biblical principles—a people who have experienced unprecedented military peace and prosperity. But it is folly to conclude that human peace (with God or each other) can be found or maintained through the vehicle of human virtue or innovation.

There is common criticism against those who would seek to live a life pleasing to God. People are fond of quoting Einstein who apparently said something to the effect:

If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed

First, this is not an accurate assessment of Christianity (perhaps it was influenced more by his Jewish heritage). Christians seek to do good because they have escaped punishment by the grace of God, not in order to secure it. And their hope is not a wish, the way one might hope for good weather or to win the lottery. It is a sure expectation of heavenly peace found on the promise of God through the cross of Christ.

That being said, what people fail to realize is that when man seeks to remove God from the equation of his existence, ‘good’ itself loses definition and the human race will find itself oppressed by the despots who have decided the fear of God, and goodness defined by God, is an outdated concept. I use “despot” only to make a point. It can apply to any person who operates as if they are the sole and final ethical authority in any relationship. Charles Hodge aptly states:

They act as if there were no God, no Being to whom they are responsible for their conduct, and who has the purpose and power to punish them for their iniquity.³

³ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 80.

And before our minds begin to swing to those who we feel fall into this category, let us keep in mind that the indictment is against the entire human race—pushing us to recognize that our only deliverance is found in Christ.

Total Depravity

I don't intend to recap our entire series on Total Depravity. Suffice it to say that Total Depravity means the whole of man's being (body, soul, mind, will) is affected by sin so much that he cannot, in fact, will not seek to take one step toward true heaven. The natural man can do no spiritual good.

We spoke of the more popular view pervasive in our culture which teaches that man is capable, according to his nature, of availing Himself of God's grace or that God **“will do everything within His loving power to save all He can.”** What we inevitably hear in contemporary gospel presentations is that God makes an offer then puts His hands gently and passively behind His back, waiting for man to make the right decision.

And whereas the call to believe is certainly to be issued; and it is also true that man has a moral responsibility to believe in and obey the God who made him. The notion of God being passive at any time and in any way when it comes to salvation is contrary to the power of the cross and to the nature of man as taught in this passage.

The Scriptures bombard the notion that man, who has a sinful nature, is capable of a proper response to God.

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? *Then* may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil (Jeremiah 13:23)?

The implied answer to this question is 'no'. One drop of poison makes the entire glass deadly. A bad tree can only produce bad fruit.

Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin (John 8:34).

Is Jesus using a poor metaphor? What makes a slave a slave other than his lack of freedom to operate outside the boundaries of his slavery? Whoever commits sin (everybody) is a slave of sin. One must argue that unbelief is not a sin. For if unbelief is a sin then one can only operate within the boundaries of unbelief.

The Instrument of Faith

Therefore, a critical question when it comes to Calvinism is the source of belief or saving faith. From where do we get faith? Faith (in Christ), according to the Calvinist, is the instrument through which God grants justification. The granting of faith, according to Calvinism, is inextricably related to the cross. Faith is not something we bring to or add to the cross; it is something we get from the cross. I don't come to the cross with a faith produced from my own nature. I am rather drawn to the cross with a faith granted by the very same cross. From beginning to end the glory for my salvation belongs to Christ.

It is a great error to view faith as something morally neutral. If faith is not a free gift from God, then it is the greatest work a man can possibly do. To those who are opposed to the reformed doctrines of grace, faith must be understood as man's obedience to the First Commandment. They must argue that man, by virtue of his semi-fallen state, still has enough ability to obey and believe the First Commandment unto salvation.

It may be shocking to view faith as a work, but for those who reject Total Depravity faith is the premiere work, it is the saving work; it is the added touch to the cross without which the cross would be utterly meaningless and impotent to save. Faith, accordingly, but unthinkably, must be a work because faithlessness, so far from being some neutral frame of mind, is clearly a sin.

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (Hebrews 3:12).

The wages of sin (including the sin of unbelief) is death. Paul writes of this spiritual death.

And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1).

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses (Colossians 2:13).

How much help does the dead person need to be made alive? And it is here that those who reject Total Depravity, perhaps unwittingly, form illustrations which may be heartfelt but misguided in their evangelistic efforts.

The Injured Person

The anti-Calvinist often compares the sinner to an injured person who sees their need and simply cries for help; seems humble⁴ enough. Until we realize that the injured person sees their need arising out of their own sinful state as an offense to God. But of course the unbeliever does not believe (in God) so why this sudden awareness of injury and need? Who opened their eyes to see this? And if the injury is death, there will be no cry for help.

The Drowning Person

In this scenario we are told that the gospel is like throwing the drowning person a life-saver. But of course, first you must realize you're drowning (a sinner in need of a Savior). How have you become aware of this while lying in a pool of death surrounded by other dead bodies? Why do you think you're drowning? And the inventor of this illustration is must be unfamiliar with water safety for it is quite difficult to hang onto a life-saver amidst the overwhelming swells. It is especially difficult to hold on if you're already dead.

The Present

⁴ Of course humility is a great virtue.

Another popular illustration is that of the gospel being a present that is given to you but is of no advantage to you until you open it. Depending upon the wrapping material some presents can be quite difficult to open; again especially if you're dead. But is it true that the gift is of no advantage to me until I open it? Is not the gift mine? Do I not own it? Is it not part of my estate? To use a more biblical term, are not the contents of the gift imputed (credited to my account) to me. If, therefore, the gift is the gospel, and I die without opening it, will not the final accounting show that it belongs to me whether I opened it or not? And if God sees it as something on my ledger, will not it be accounted to me for righteousness. This illustration, of course, ignores the Calvinistic assertion that because of God's efficacious grace, the present is always opened.

The Pardon

We are then given the image of the criminal facing the death penalty. The governor grants a pardon but the criminal must receive it in order to avoid the execution. This again, assumes the criminal even knows he's a criminal and is under a death sentence. This assumes he recognizes the authority of the one giving the pardon. But even further, if the governor grants a pardon, it would be murderous to execute the man; he's been pardoned. The executioner has no more right to kill the man than he has to kill any man on the street who, for some strange reason, wishes to die.

The Strongest Inclination

One last thought regarding man's ability. It is asserted that God does His part but leaves the final decision to man—one man says yes, the other says no. But I believe the wheels come off the theological cart when one ponders a somewhat tautological (needlessly repetitive) statement made by Jonathon Edwards to the effect *that each man must follow his strongest inclination at the moment.*

The implications of such a statement are overwhelming. For it is not a matter of fallen man merely making a decision for Christ the way we might choose chocolate over strawberry. It is fallen man making a decision for Christ which regards Christ above any and all

other decisions in his life. The anti-Calvinist must argue that fallen man's strongest inclination is to follow Christ. And the anti-Calvinist must argue that it is fallen man's continued strongest inclination to follow Christ all his life.

One must then argue that the great martyrs' strongest inclination was to choose Christ over life itself. The anti-Calvinist must argue that this inclination, this ability, was found in the nature of the sinner rather than in the power of God. It certainly appears that this assigns to the nature of man a virtue foreign to the descriptions offered by the Holy Text.

I address these popular views not to unnecessarily attack other professing Christians with whom I might have a minor disagreement. I think a proper understanding of our nature is critical to our ministerial efforts, our sanctification and our proper worship of God. Calvin profoundly comments:

What, then? There is no doubt but that the character of men is described in those words, in order that we may see what man is when left to himself; for Scripture testifies that all men are in this state, who are not regenerated by the grace of God. The condition of the saints would be nothing better, were not this depravity corrected in them: and that they may still remember that they differ nothing from others by nature, they do find in the relics of their flesh (by which they are always encompassed) the seeds of those evils, which would constantly produce fruits, were they not prevented by being mortified; and for this mortification they are indebted to God's mercy and not to their own nature.⁵

Questions for Study

⁵ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 3:18). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

1. Review the context of this passage. What appears to be Paul's point in verses 10-18? Discuss human nature. Why is this information important (pages 2-4)?
2. Paul writes the natural man is swift to shed blood. Read the passage from which he quotes in the Old Testament (Isaiah 59:7-20) and discuss your observations. Do you see these human attributes in today's culture? Where is the gospel in that passage (pages 4, 5)?
3. Will man's silent rebellion against God remain silent? What will it end up looking like (pages 5, 6)?
4. Is the fear of God a good thing? Do Christians obey God because of fear of punishment or hope of reward? Explain (page 6).
5. What happens to notions like "goodness" when man seeks to remove God from the equation of his existence (page 7)?
6. Define Total Depravity. What is it? What is it not (page 7)?
7. Is man, according to his own nature, capable of a positive response to God? Explain using Scripture (page 8).
8. Is faith a work (pages 8, 9)?
9. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the common scenarios used to present the gospel (pages 9, 10).
10. Is it necessary that each man must follow his strongest inclination at the moment? What are the implications of such a statement (page 11)?