

The Doctrine of Sin

Selected Scriptures

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Introduction

It was two weeks ago that I preached the final verses of 2 Corinthians. And that glorious letter ends on a particularly high note, with the Apostle Paul wishing Trinitarian blessings upon the congregation at Corinth. And in my sermon on that passage, I mentioned that I wanted to spend some extra time on the Trinity, because it's a doctrine that lies at the very heart of the Christian faith and it's a doctrine that so few of us are properly acquainted with. And so, in the last two weeks I began studying to preach a message on the Trinity, which I intended to preach this morning. But as I was finishing up my preparation and began to write the sermon, it wasn't long before I realized that I had more than a single sermon's worth of material. It was much more like a series than a sermon. And so at some point we will do a series on the doctrine of the Trinity.

But this morning, sort of in keeping with the theme of Phil's last two messages on the mortification of sin—one from Psalm 51 and the other from Colossians 3:5–10—I want to preach a message on the doctrine of sin. And in this sermon, I don't so much want to focus on how to fight sin as a believer, which Phil covered capably over the last two weeks. Instead, I want to focus on the *origin* of sin in the human race, the *transmission* of sin from Adam to each of us, and the spiritual *effects* of sin on humanity as a whole.

Now some of you are thinking, "Why would you want to focus on that? That sounds depressing!" And the answer is, for the same reason an astronomer longs to look into the darkness of the night sky. If you think about it, the stars never go away. They're in the sky right now. But we don't see the stars during the day because their radiance is outshone by the superior light of the sun. It's only as the sun retreats from view, and as the heavens are shrouded in darkness, that the brilliance of the stars become visible to us. The glory of the stars are only enjoyed against the dark contrast of the night sky. I remember the same principle illustrated clearly to me when I went shopping for Janna's engagement ring. As I visited jeweler after jeweler, I'd look at all of the diamonds in the display cases. And when I'd want to look at one more closely, they didn't just take it out and put it on the glass case. No, they all did the same thing. They laid the diamond on a piece of black velvet cloth. Why? Because the diamond seems to sparkle all the more brightly when it's set against the black backdrop of that cloth.

Well, the doctrine of man's sin functions in a very similar way with respect to the glory of our salvation as does the night sky for the stars, or a black velvet cloth for a diamond. If we are to have any hope of properly apprehending the brilliant glory revealed in God's work of saving

sinners, we need to see that glory set against the black backdrop of our sin. We need to properly understand the state from which we need to be saved. Even that language of “saved,” of “salvation,” means nothing unless we understand from *what* we have been saved. If we underestimate the severity of humanity’s natural state and the gravity of our need before a holy God, we will inevitably underestimate the sovereign power of God’s remedy and the glory of His salvation. Conversely, if we are going to worship God for the fullness of His saving work in our lives, we must devote ourselves to understanding man’s fall into sin as well as the effects of that fall on the whole of mankind.

And so with that in mind, let’s come to our present study. We won’t be focusing on a single text of Scripture, but we’ll consider several passages as they bear on our subject. And we’ll outline our study in **four points**. First, we’ll look at **man’s original righteousness** as he was created by God. Second, we’ll examine **man’s catastrophic fall** into sin. Third, **man’s imputed guilt**. And fourth, we’ll consider **man’s total depravity** as he presently labors under the curse of sin.

I. Man’s Original Righteousness

Well in the first place, let’s consider **man’s original state**. And this first point will be disproportionately shorter than the others, but it’s necessary groundwork to lay as we seek to understand the fall. We have to grasp the state from which we’ve fallen before we can adequately grasp our fall into sin.

Having said that, it’s important to observe that Scripture says that God made man “very good.” Genesis chapter 1 chronicles God’s creation of everything—the dry land and the waters, the plants and the trees, the sun, moon, and stars, and the fish, birds, and beasts. And after the report of the creation of each of these things, Scripture repeatedly adds the phrase, “And God saw that it was good.” Well, God comes to the pinnacle of His creation on Day Six—the creation of man *in His own image*, distinct from the rest of creation, verses 26 to 28. And as Moses recounts creation Day Six, he says in Genesis 1:31 that “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.”

God made man very good. Ecclesiastes 7:29 says that “God made men *upright*.” This means that Adam and Eve were not morally neutral creatures. They were created in what the Reformed tradition has called “original righteousness” (Berkhof, 204). There was no bent in human nature to sin. There was nothing *native* to the constitution of Adam that was corrupt in any sense, and therefore, if it weren’t for sin, Adam and Eve would have never had to die. Mortality is an intrusion into the nature of man; it is not original to our nature.

But, even though man was created “very good” and morally “upright,” nevertheless, Adam did not exist in the highest possible state of righteousness that man could attain. Why do I say that?

Because Adam's "original righteousness" was a *fallible* righteousness. That is to say, it was possible for Adam to fall from such a state, which, of course, Genesis 3 records, and the rest of human history testifies to. In Adam's original state, he was both able to sin and able not to sin. But that is not a state of perfect blessedness! It is not the eternal life which sinful humanity receives through salvation in Christ. Praise God that our final state of righteousness in heaven will not be one from which we can fall! In the eternal state, glorified believers will not be able to sin and able not to sin; we will be *unable* to sin. And so while Adam's original state could in some sense properly be called original righteousness, his original righteousness was not an immutable righteousness; it was a righteousness from which he could—and did—fall.

II. Man's Catastrophic Fall

And that brings us to our second point: to **man's catastrophic fall**. In the wisdom of God, God was pleased to test this original, fallible, untested righteousness of man. And this test, if passed, would have exalted man from his state of untested, fallible righteousness to a state of confirmed, infallible righteousness, or eternal life. And God did this by way of the commandment He gave to Adam in the Garden, which we see in Genesis chapter 2. Turn there with me. Genesis chapter 2, starting in verse 15: "Then Yahweh God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. Yahweh God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.'"

This was the test that would either confirm Adam's righteousness or be the cause of his undoing. If Adam disobeyed this command, both he and those he represented—that is, the entire human race; we'll get to that in a moment—but both he and those he represented would be cursed by sin. And of course, we know that's actually what happened. *But the threat of death for disobedience clearly implies the promise of life for obedience*. If Adam obeyed this command, he would have lived. He would have confirmed his righteous status and secured eternal life, both for himself and those he represented.

Now there's some controversy over this, because some people say that the alternative to death for disobedience was never a reward for obedience, but merely the continuation of life in the Garden in his present state. The problem with that, though, is that man would then be in a perpetual state of testing—always able to sin and able not to sin—never enjoying the security of eternal life with God from which he could not fall. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil would have still been there during the lives of Cain and Abel, and their children after them, and theirs after them. It could have still been here today if all of humanity refused to eat the fruit. But if someone did eventually eat of the tree, it would have been through that person that sin entered the human race, and that person would have been the representative of all humanity—an office Scripture restricts to Adam and to Christ alone.

Besides this, the natural relationship between God and man meant that Adam was already duty-bound to obey the law of God that was written in his heart. Simply by virtue of his being a creature, Adam owed obedience to his Creator. He was to love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. He was to worship Him only, making no idols out of anything in the creation. And, when his neighbors came along, he was to love them as himself, not murdering them, stealing from them, coveting what was theirs, or violating the sanctity of marriage. This law was written on Adam's heart by nature, and obedience to this law was not attended with any promise of reward. When he obeyed this law, he could only say, Luke 17:10, "I am an unprofitable servant: I have done that which was my duty to do." So if obedience to the law written on Adam's heart resulted in his continuing in his state of original righteousness, why would God add the command not to eat of the tree—something that was not inherently sinful—unless the implied promise to life was of a different character? Adam already had a law which, if he obeyed it, resulted in the continuation of his present state. Why should this arbitrary prohibition repeat that same state of affairs?

The answer is: it doesn't. This command was a law of a different sort. It was a probation of Adam's untested righteousness, which, if obeyed, would have resulted in the conferring of eternal life—of a righteousness that could not be lost or forfeited by sin. It was of a similar arrangement as expressed in Leviticus chapter 18 verse 5, where God told Israel, "So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them." Commenting on this verse, Paul writes in Romans 10:5, "For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness." Perfect obedience results in eternal life.

But perfect obedience is not what Adam rendered. As we turn to Genesis 3, we find that familiar scene where the serpent deceives Eve into eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan casts doubt on God's Word, encourages Eve to think and reason independently of the revelation of her Creator, and convinces her that God's prohibition was born out of His stinginess and tightfistedness—that, in the middle of Paradise, God was withholding blessing from her! Verses 4 and 5: "You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." "God doesn't want your eyes opened! He doesn't want you to be like Him! He doesn't want that kind of competition!" And then verse 6 says, "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food"—the lust of the flesh—"and that it was a delight to the eyes"—the lust of the eyes—"and that the tree was desirable to make one wise,"—the pride of life—"she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate."

The first human sin consisted in (1) the doubting of God's Word and the goodness of His character, (2) the rejection of His Word as the authority for life, (3) the assertion of man's own

autonomous reasoning as his authority in place of God's revelation, and (4) the breaking of God's law. And the consequences of this are unfathomable. Verse 7: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings. They heard the sound of Yahweh God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of Yahweh God among the trees of the garden." And if we took time to understand all the implications of what happened in that moment, it should make us all weep. The creature had forsaken and rebelled against the Creator. The man had failed his test. The human race was catapulted into depravity and shame. The man and his wife died in that moment, just as surely as God had promised. In their fig leaves and loin coverings, man-made religion and self-atonement came into being. Fellowship with God was broken. Man hid himself from the Delight of his eyes, the source of all satisfaction.

"Then," verse 9, "Yahweh God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'" Notice, even though Eve sinned first, God calls man to account for this transgression. Why? Because, even before the fall, Adam, not Eve, was the head of the home. And, perhaps even more significantly, Adam, not Eve, was the representative head of the human race whose actions counted for all mankind. And man answers in verse 10 and says that he was afraid because he was naked. So shame and fear resulted from the fall. And God asks how he knew he was naked, and whether he ate from the tree. And in verse 12 Adam shifts the blame: "The woman whom You gave to be with me, *she* gave me from the tree, and I ate." And then Eve says, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." And so blame-shifting has resulted from the fall.

And then we see that the world is cursed. Verse 14 says the serpent is cursed more than any animal, verse 15, which means that animals are cursed by the fall. Verse 16 says Satan is cursed by the promise of the Gospel: the Seed of the woman will crush the serpent's head. The woman, verse 17, is cursed with multiplied pain in childbirth. Verses 18 to 19 say that the creation itself is cursed, and that man is cursed with painful labor in working the ground. And then, along with the spiritual death that took place in the moment of disobedience, man is cursed with physical death, sentenced to return to the dust of the ground from which he was taken. Finally, in verses 22 to 24, mankind is expelled from the Garden, driven from God's presence, exiled from the eternal life with God that he was promised.

III. Man's Imputed Guilt

But even as this passage indicates, the effects of the fall reached well beyond *that*. Because God appointed Adam to be the representative of the entire human race, when Adam fell into sin and died, all of humanity fell into sin and died as well. And that brings to our **third point**, namely: **man's imputed guilt**. And the classic text for this is Romans chapter 5, verses 12 to 19. Turn there with me. In this text, Paul is concerned to demonstrate that there is a parallel between (a)

the guilt and condemnation of all who are united to Adam and (b) the righteousness and justification of all who are united to Christ.

And several verses in this paragraph are relevant to our topic. The key verse is verse 12. Paul writes, “Therefore, just as through one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death through sin,”—that is death is the consequence of sin; before sin there was no death—“and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” This death, that came as a result of Adam’s transgression, spread to all people. And Paul says that is because all sinned. We’ll come back to this thought, but let’s keep going in the passage. Verse 15 says, “By the transgression of the one [Adam] the many [humanity] died.” Verse 16: “The judgment arose from one transgression”—the sin of Adam—“resulting in condemnation.” Verse 17: “By the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one.” Verse 18: “Through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men.” And verse 19: “Through the one man’s disobedience the many were made,” or constituted, “sinners.” So the point is plain. Adam’s one transgression of eating of the fruit of the tree brought condemnation to all people. All human beings are born sinful, alienated from God and in need of salvation, because what Adam did counted for all of humanity.

Now, in what way and in what sense did all people sin, verse 12, with the result that death spread to all men? The fourth-century heretic Pelagius, along with his followers, say that this means no more than that each person dies as a result of each person’s personal sin. All people sin and fall short of the glory of God; the wages of sin is death; and so all people die as a consequence of their personal sin. Adam was nothing more than a bad example, and human beings have followed in the footsteps of his sin and so we follow in the footsteps of his death.

Well, all people do die because of their personal sin, but this verse is actually saying more than that. Romans 5:12 does not merely say that death “spreads” to all men because all “sin.” Those verbs are not in the present tense. Paul is not merely teaching that, as a matter of course, death eventually spreads to all people because all people eventually sin. Let’s look at this closely. There are three verbs in verse 12, with a fourth implied. Paul says that (1) sin *entered* into the world; he says that (2) death *entered* through sin, and though the verb is not repeated it’s clearly implied; he says that (3) death *spread* to all men; and he says, finally, that (4) all *sinned*. All of those verbs are in the aorist tense, and they are all parallel to each other. That means that we are constrained by the context to interpret them all in the same way; one’s not going to be past tense while another is in the present tense.

Now, normally, verbs in the aorist tense are translated in the simple past. And the New American Standard translates them that way here: sin *entered*. But sometimes, the aorist can be used to refer to present tense events that happen as a matter of course. Grammarians call that a gnomic use of the aorist. In other words, depending on the context, an aorist verb could be translated not in the past time but as a proverbial present. So if the context allows, the grammar of this verse

could be translated, “Death spreads to all men because all sin.” As a matter of course, everybody dies, because, as a matter of course, everybody sins.

But is it best to interpret these as proverbial aorists here? No, it’s not. The context won’t allow that in this case, because, again, what’s true for one of these verbs must be true of all three. And the first one shuts the door on that idea. It is not Paul’s intent to say, “Just as through one man sin *enters* the world.” Sin does not *enter* the world; sin *entered* the world, at a specific point in the past—namely, the moment that Adam sinned in the Garden. Therefore, context demands that the other aorist verbs in this verse be interpreted the same way. “Through one man sin entered into the world, and death [entered] through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.” So the verse is translated correctly: all people sinned at a particular point in the past.

Now, the question is: when did all people—that is, every one of Adam’s natural posterity, which includes people who will be born tomorrow—at what point in the past did all people sin? The answer has to be: they sinned when Adam sinned. Their sin was Adam’s sin. All people sinned in Adam. 1 Corinthians 15:22: “In Adam all die.” That is to say, by virtue of the union between Adam and his posterity, the guilt of Adam’s sin is counted to be theirs. Romans 5:19: “As through the one man’s disobedience, the many were *made*—or constituted, or reckoned, or counted, or imputed—sinners.” Adam was the representative head of humanity, such that God counted the actual disobedience of Adam against all who were *in* him—all who were united to him; which is to say, every human being who ever lived or will live, except for Jesus Christ. Adam’s guilt is immediately imputed to his descendants.

This is called representative headship. Some theologians, though, reject that view in favor of what is called seminal headship. This view teaches that all people were not just counted to be united to Adam in his sin, but that we were all really in Adam, seminally, when he committed his sin, and that’s why we inherit his corrupt nature. Original sin, they say, consists in our inheriting Adam’s corruption, not in being imputed his guilt. They often appeal to Hebrews 7:10, which speaks about how because Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, it can be said that Levi—the father of the Levites, the priests to whom tithes were paid—Levi himself paid tithes *in* Abraham, “for,” the text says, “he was still *in the loins of his father* when Melchizedek met him.” Because Levi was seminally in the loins of Abraham, Abraham’s action could be said to be his action. In the same way, they say, because Adam’s nature *was* human nature, and because we were in his loins, his sin corrupted human nature, and that corrupt human nature was passed to us.

But not only does this interaction between Abraham and Melchizedek have nothing to do with the doctrine of original sin, Scripture nowhere speaks the same way of Adam and his descendants. We are never told that we were in the loins of Adam. Besides, if that were how it works, why are we responsible only for Adam’s first sin in the Garden, and not each of his sins? We were just as much in his loins when he committed the rest of his sins. And yet Romans 5:16

says judgment arose from *one transgression*. Verse 18 says it was through *one transgression* [that] there resulted condemnation to all men. Again, verse 12 says that all sinned at one point in time, not at the multiple points of time throughout Adam's life. And besides even that, we were no more in Adam's loins than we were in Noah's loins, or our earthly fathers' loins; why aren't we guilty of their sins as well?

And aside from even all that, the seminal view can't account for the parallelism between Adam and Christ that is the substance of Paul's entire point in Romans 5:12–19. His entire point is to explain how Christ's work can count for the believer. How is it right for God to give the Christian credit for Christ's work? And his answer is to explain that they should have no problem with the concept of imputation of the actions of a representative head to those who are united to him, because that's exactly what happened with Adam. The imputation of righteousness in Christ follows the exact same pattern of the imputation of guilt in Adam.

And so we must ask the question: is Christ's righteousness passed to His people seminally? Is it because we were somehow really in Christ's loins that His works of obedience counted for ours? Of course not. Christ fathered no natural children. Our union with Christ was not natural or seminal; it was legal. Christ is the legal representative of all who are united to Him. The lived-out record of His righteousness is imputed to our account, so that His obedience is counted as our obedience. In the same way, Adam is the legal representative of all who are united to Him. The lived-out record of his disobedience in the Garden is imputed to our account, so that his guilt is counted as our guilt.

So to summarize, all humanity sinned in Adam by virtue of the legal union that we had with him. That is to say, all humanity is imputed with Adam's guilt, and therefore, in Adam all die, 1 Corinthians 15:22. Because sin not only brings legal guilt but also practical corruption, human nature *is* corrupted and polluted by sin, and that practical corruption of sin is transmitted through natural generation, or procreation. So: we inherit *both* the guilt *and* the corruption of Adam's sin, our actual corruption following from our **imputed guilt**.

IV. Man's Present State: Total Depravity

And that brings us to the **fourth point** of our outline: to **man's present state** as he labors under the curse of sin. We've seen man's original righteousness. We've seen man's catastrophic fall. We've seen man's imputed guilt. Now we need to consider who man is before God in this world. And the answer to that question is that man is **totally depraved**. Number four: **man's total depravity**.

Because all of humankind was counted to have sinned in union with Adam, every human being inherits a corrupt, sinful nature from conception. Human nature is so thoroughly corrupted by sin

that we are entirely unable to free ourselves from sin and its consequences—unable even to make the first move toward God to find a remedy for our sin. The Westminster Confession captures the doctrine of total depravity well when it says, “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able by his own strength to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto” (9.3).

And like I said, this is the state in which *all* human beings find themselves since the fall. In David’s prayer of repentance in Psalm 51, he says in verse 5, “Behold, I was *brought forth* in iniquity, and in sin my mother *conceived* me.” This doesn’t mean that David’s mother somehow conceived him in a sinful fashion; David refers to his mother as the Lord’s handmaid in both Psalm 86:16 and 116:16. No, this is teaching that David was sinful even from his birth—in fact, even from the moment of his conception. He says something similar in Psalm 58:3. He writes, “The wicked are estranged *from the womb*; these who speak lies go astray *from birth*.” And Paul certifies this in the New Testament. In Ephesians chapter 2, he is reminding the Ephesian believers what their state was before coming to faith in Christ. In verse 1, he says, “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins.” Before we come to Christ, we exist in a state of spiritual death. He picks up in verse 3, “Among them”—that is, among unbelievers, whom Paul calls “the sons of disobedience” in verse 2—“Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, *and were by nature children of wrath*, even as the rest.” Human beings by nature are said to be children of wrath. Nothing at all has to happen to us to make us this way. We are born in such a way that, by nature, if nothing and no one were to intervene, we would be just recipients of the wrath of God against our sin. Because of the fall, and because of our union to Adam our representative head, this is what all humanity is by nature. We are **totally depraved**.

Now, “total depravity” does not mean *utter* depravity. It doesn’t mean that the unregenerate man is as bad as he can possibly be. It doesn’t mean that unsaved people can’t perform acts of relative goodness on a “horizontal” level, or that they can’t recognize and appreciate virtue in the world. By God’s common grace, God mercifully restrains the evil even in His enemies, so that our sin-cursed world is not as horrible of a place as it could be. No, depravity is total in two senses: it is universal, and it is comprehensive. We’ll work through each of those in their turn.

A. Universal Depravity

First, depravity is universal. That is to say, sin’s corruption plagues every member of the human race alike; no one is excepted (aside, of course, from Christ, who was not reckoned to be in Adam, and whose humanity was begotten by the Holy Spirit and not by a human father in natural generation). Several passages of Scripture bear this out. In 1 Kings 8:46, as Solomon is praying his prayer of dedication for the temple, he prays that Yahweh would be merciful when Israel sins

against Him. And almost as an aside—almost as if it was an assumption that was universally accepted and needed no explanation—he says, “for there is no man who does not sin.” In Ecclesiastes 7:20, Solomon writes, “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.” That is the standard for fellowship with God: continual doing of good and never sinning. And no one on earth meets that standard.

In the New Testament, we turn to Romans chapter 3, where Paul is building his argument for the universal need of God’s grace of salvation in Christ. And he says in verse 10: “As it is written”—that is, in Psalm 14:1–3 and Psalm 58:1–3; which shows that this doctrine of universal depravity is not a New Testament invention—“There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.” I’m not sure if any point in all of Scripture is made with a greater degree of clarity than that. No one is good! Sin has corrupted everyone! Depravity is universal.

B. Comprehensive Depravity

But secondly, **depravity** is called **total** not only because it’s universal, but also because it is comprehensive. That is to say, the corruption of sin extends to every aspect of man’s nature; no part of any human being remains unaffected by the fall. The mind, the heart, and the will of man are all totally polluted by sin. Let’s turn to Scripture to bear this out.

First, sin has totally corrupted the human **mind**. The human intellect is totally depraved. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the noetic effects of the fall—from the Greek word *noéō*, to understand. These are the effects of sin upon the understanding, the mind. Romans 1:21 says, “For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools.” This is sin’s effect upon the mind. And the result of that is spoken of a few verses earlier in verse 18, where Paul says that fallen man suppresses the truth in unrighteousness. When we exchange the worship of the Creator for the worship of the creature—which is exactly what happened in the Garden, when Eve worshiped her own autonomous reasoning over and against God and His Word—when that happens, we become fools. And though we know the truth, because God has made it evident to us (verse 20), we suppress the truth.

Ephesians chapter 4 verses 17 and 18 is another passage that speaks of the depravity of the human mind. There Paul speaks of the Gentiles who don’t know God, and he charges the church not to behave like them, who, he says, “walk in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.” The mind has become futile. The understanding has been darkened.

Man is characterized by ignorance. And then 1 Corinthians 2:14 is paramount here. There, Paul writes, “But a natural man”—again, that is, man in his natural state; because of the fall, nothing has to happen to cause this; it’s just natural—“A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God,”—which he’s just defined in verses 12 and 13 as God’s revelation—“A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.” The natural man’s mind has been so corrupted by sin that the revelation of God is foolishness to him. He is totally unable to accept the truth as God’s revealed it in His Word, and so he is totally unable to do anything to save himself or even make the first motion toward salvation.

Second, sin has totally corrupted the human **heart**, which speaks to the affectional life of man—his desires: what he loves, what he hates. You know, often times you hear people today excuse their sin by saying, “God knows my heart.” Yes, God does know your heart. But that should cause you no comfort, because apart from saving faith in Jesus Christ, this is God’s estimation of your heart: Genesis 6 verse 5: “Then Yahweh saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that *every* intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” God saw the heart of humanity, and what He saw so grieved Him that He drowned the entire planet! You say, “Oh, that was only for that generation of sinners before the flood.” Nope. Jeremiah chapter 17 verse 9: “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is incurable.” In John 3:19, Jesus says, “This is the judgment, the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light.” You see, man’s **heart**—his desires, his affections—are so corrupted by sin that he loves what he should hate and hates what he should love. Man loves darkness.

2 Corinthians 4:4 captures this preeminently. There Paul says, “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Depravity consists in this moral blindness that sees beauty and glory and is unaffected by it. The human heart is so disordered that it refuses what is most precious because it is blind to its value. Man loves darkness and hates light. He loves evil and hates good. And so, as Paul said in Romans 3:11, “There is none who seeks for God.” The heart is so backwards as a result of sin that the God who is worthy to be sought out by all creatures is sought out by none of them.

And so sin has corrupted the mind and the heart. But it has also, thirdly, wholly corrupted the **will**. Since the fall, man’s **will** has never been free; it’s been enslaved to sin. Jesus says this in John 8:34: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.” And everyone commits sin. The reason everyone commits sin is because everyone is a slave of sin. Sin has mastered the human will, so that we act in accordance with our corrupt nature. We do what we want. And because our wills are enslaved, we want only what is sinful.

Paul says the same thing in Romans chapter 6, starting in verse 16. He asks, “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.” And he repeats this in verse 20. He says, “You were slaves of sin.” And he’s not singling the Romans out as anything special. This is the state of everyone before they are saved: our wills are enslaved to sin. And so in Isaiah 53:6, we are told that “Each of us has turned to his own way.” Our wills have gone astray from God. We live to please ourselves. Like Eve, we will what is our will, rather than what is God’s will.

You see, the will is actuated by the heart. We desire what we love. And because the mind and heart have been corrupted by sin, we desire the wrong things. When we say that man doesn’t have free will, we are not saying that man doesn’t have the capability to make genuine choices. That would be to say that man doesn’t have will. But man does have will; he *is* free to make choices. But because his heart is corrupt and the will is enslaved to sin, he is not free to make *holy* choices. Because his entire nature is sinful, he wills only what is sin. And so Lorraine Boettner explains, “The inability under which [man] labors is not an inability to exercise volitions, but an inability to be willing to exercise holy volitions. And it is this...which led Luther to declare, ‘Free-will is an empty term, whose reality is lost. And a lost liberty, according to my grammar, is no liberty at all.’” And then Boettner comments, “In matters pertaining to his salvation, the unregenerate man is not at liberty to choose between good and evil, but only to choose between greater and lesser evil, which is not properly free will” (62). And so man is free to make choices, but because his will is enslaved to sin, he is not free to make the *right* choices. For that, his will needs to be freed by the effectual grace of the Holy Spirit in regeneration.

C. Total Inability

But until that moment, man remains **totally unable** to will any spiritual good. Not only can he not save himself; not only can he not take the initiative in salvation. Even after God has taken the initiative in salvation, man cannot even receive the offer of God’s grace by believing in the Gospel until his will has been freed in regeneration. And so for this reason, we often speak of man’s **total depravity** as man’s **total inability**.

And we hear of it often in the Scriptures. In John chapter 3 verse 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. In verse 6, He explains that “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” In other words, unless man is first born again—regenerated—by the work of the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God by faith. Until man’s nature is changed in regeneration, he is nothing but

flesh. And flesh can only produce flesh. The only way any spiritual life is possible is if man's nature is changed and his will is freed in regeneration.

In John chapter 6, verse 44, Jesus states this same truth even more plainly: "No one *can* come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." Man is unable to come to Jesus unless he drawn by the Father through the work of the Spirit in regeneration. First Corinthians 2:14, again, says that the natural man cannot understand the things of the Spirit. And again to Ephesians 2:1: Paul says that man in his natural state is dead in trespasses and sins. This is not spiritual sickness! We are not morally wounded! We are not drowning in the sea in search of a divine life-preserver! We are *dead*—drowned, lungs filled with water, body bloated and decomposing on the ocean floor, in need of resurrection! Spiritual death speaks of a **total inability** to make oneself alive. A corpse cannot will himself to life. He must be raised from the dead by power external to himself. He must be born all over again.

Romans 8:7–8 speaks to this. There Paul says, "The mind set on the flesh"—which is to say, the human mind in its natural state—"is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God." Apart from regeneration, our minds, hearts, and wills are so corrupted by sin that we are not even able submit to God's law. We cannot please Him. In Hebrews 11:6, it says that "Without faith it is impossible to please" God, which clearly implies that faith does please God. And if faith does please God, but the natural man cannot please God, then that means the natural man cannot have faith apart from having his nature renewed in regeneration. Regeneration is the cause, not the consequence, of saving faith.

Because of his fall into sin, man is **totally unable** to will any spiritual good—especially unable to exercise the repentant, saving faith that is required in order to receive salvation. Certain streams of theology deny this teaching by positing what they call the doctrine of "prevenient grace." This is the idea that Jesus, by His universal atonement on the cross, has granted to all people without exception what could be called a blend of common grace and special grace. This grace supposedly neutralizes the effects of original sin, bringing the sinner to a state where his mind is not entirely darkened, his heart is not entirely corrupted, his will is not entirely enslaved, and therefore he *is* able to respond to the Gospel using his free will.

But this doctrine of prevenient grace is nowhere supported by the text of Scripture. No passage of Scripture speaks of the cross providing a universal revocation of the effects of the fall. Scripture everywhere speaks of the cross actually purchasing full salvation for the elect of God whose sins were punished in Christ their substitute! Nor does Scripture ever represent unregenerate man as if he's been restored to some place of moral neutrality by a work of general grace. As we have just seen, the consistent testimony of Scripture concerning the nature of sinful man apart from regenerating grace is overwhelmingly pessimistic. He is blind, dead, ignorant,

hard-hearted, hostile to God, unable to submit to Him, a slave to sin, and wholly inclined to evil—a state which cannot be overcome without the effectual, regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

So much more can be said, but where does all of this leave us? Well, it brings us to the Gospel of sovereign grace. If man's depravity is to be overcome—if sinners are going to be saved from sin—God Himself must be the One to effect salvation! Man is absolutely powerless to do so, since we are bound in sin and spiritually dead. And so, because man is totally unable to respond to the Gospel, God Himself graciously intervenes in sovereign grace.

And that's the message that I preached in the main service last week. That He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. God the Father sent God the Son—His beloved Son, in whom He was well-pleased—to be born as a man, and to live and die in the place of sinners. Jesus Christ lived the perfect life that Adam was commanded to live but failed to live—that you and I were commanded to live but failed to live. Jesus never sinned. Not once! Not in anything He ever did, not in anything He ever said, not in anything He ever thought or felt. He was perfectly righteous!

And because He was, He was a fitting substitute to die as a sacrifice in the place of sinners. On the cross, the Father charged the sins of all those who would ever believe to Christ's account, and punished Him as if He had lived their lives. And so all of our stains of sin are washed away in the blood of Christ's sacrifice. He bore God's wrath against our sin. And He did this so that the Father could—justly and legally and righteously—treat sinners as if they lived Jesus' life of perfect righteousness. And we lay hold of that gift of salvation—not through any works we could do or rituals we could perform, but solely through faith alone, which God gives as a gift to those whom He means to save.

And if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, I call you to believe on that Gospel this morning. Turn from your sins. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. And for my brothers and sisters, remember the hopeless condition from which you were rescued. Set the glorious gem of Gospel grace against the black backdrop of your sin, and praise God for the great salvation by which we have been saved.