

# THE CHASM BETWEEN

Pt. 1 - The Doctrine of Total Depravity

TEXT: ROMANS 3:9-18 (ESV)



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## Systematic Thought

This week and next are two parts of one message on a doctrine vital to Christian faith. In fact, if you do not grasp the doctrine we're focusing on here, you cannot understand Christianity because you will not understand why we call Christ our Savior. The doctrine in view has gone by many names, "the sinfulness of man," "radical corruption," or perhaps most commonly "Total Depravity." If you've ever heard of the five points of Calvinism, often remembered through the mnemonic device "TULIP," the first point, the "T" in TULIP, is *Total Depravity*.

The aim of this message is to define the doctrine—what is Total Depravity and where do we find it in the Bible? Next week we'll focus on the impact of this doctrine, asking what it means for us in light of God's redeeming work in the world. Later we'll unpack the other points in TULIP (**U**nconditional Election, **L**imited Atonement, **I**rresistible Grace and **P**erseverance of the Saints) in the same way—defining these doctrines and then exploring their impact. But for now, we're taking up the first.

I want to set the stage by talking about what we call "systematic theology"—the work of organizing the themes, dimensions and emphases of Scripture into categories of thought and then, in turn, showing how they relate to one another. Total Depravity (and the rest of TULIP) is the fruit of systematic theology—taking passages, principles and pericopes of Scripture, interpreting their meaning in light of the rest of the whole of Scripture and then asking what eternal truths they bring to light.

IVP's New Dictionary of Theology defines systematic theology as "a discipline within the science of knowing God [which] makes two assumptions: 1. Man, made in God's likeness, is a reasoning being and in response to the revelation which God has made, must use his rationality to apprehend God. 2. The Bible reveals not only the character of God and His purposes in Jesus Christ, but there is harmony in the mode of God's unveiling." (NDoT, IVP) Scripture interprets Scripture. We understand Genesis better in light of Hebrews, and the Psalms better in light of Jesus quoting them.

If you're starting to lose interest, let me say we're all systematic thinkers. If you've ever wanted the greasy burger but ordered the salad instead, cared about your child's grade in school, clipped a coupon or applied sunscreen, you're a systematic thinker because all of these things we do based on conviction that what we do in the moment has a direct relationship to many other truths that exist outside of our immediate choices. One 50 cent coupon may not matter much, but five hundred of them over the course of a year is a car payment.

The same applies to grades in school. We don't exhort our kids to excel in U.S. history because if they don't know who the 13<sup>th</sup> president was, they'll be less than human. We want our kids to do well in history class because we want them to develop good study skills, to apply themselves, to become responsible at a

young age so when they are older, they will have the tools necessary to be people of character, excelling in their vocations, living and loving well. And when we see them failing third grade history, we tutor, take away privileges and monitor progress because we see signs of a possible bad habit or obstacle to learning we want to deal with early so it doesn't develop into a habit in their learning which might hurt them later. We understand this history grade doesn't exist in a vacuum, but relates, even if a little, to other important implications down the road in life. So we make sure they know it was Millard Fillmore.

Theology works the same. When Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me," (Jn 14:6) on its own, we could take that a million different ways. We could build temples and pay homage as though He demanded tribute, like the Greeks did to appease their gods. Or we could presume Jesus meant He wanted people to become enlightened through His inspirational teachings, like the Buddhists with their prophet. Or we could figure He means this in reference to His coming crucifixion and Resurrection, but how? If no one comes to the Father but by Him, don't we want to know what that means? Hadn't we better understand the context?

How do we get at that answer? We keep reading. And we go back to read what came before. See, the Bible is not primarily arranged like a systematic theology book—where you can turn to "S" to read about sin and salvation. Sure, there are many parts that are very systematic, but the Bible isn't a textbook in outline form. It is story, poetry, history, prophecy and epistle (or letters.) But it tells a story based on eternal truths which dictate how the stories are to be understood. Systematic theology seeks to mine these truths that we might understand how to faithfully apply them to our lives before God.

From Genesis 1 through Revelation 22, the Bible tells us human beings were created to know and enjoy God. And all the way up through Genesis 2, this is just what we did. But by the third chapter of Scripture, humanity rebelled against God, and the remaining 1,187 chapters tell the story of how far we've fallen, and what it would take to restore us to God. Total Depravity assesses the damages of our first parent's sin against God and the ripple-effect that reaches well beyond our generation. The Apostle Paul wrote one of the most systematic books in the Bible, Romans, in which he presents as thorough an articulation of our depraved condition as you need. (Notice the references I've included in the text. Paul systematically pulls one eternal truth from a variety of places in Scripture which all teach the same thing.)

## Romans 3:9-18

<sup>9</sup>What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,<sup>10</sup> as it is written:

<sup>10</sup>None is righteous, no, not one;

<sup>11</sup>no one understands; no one seeks for God.

<sup>12</sup>All have turned aside;

together they have become worthless;

no one does good, not even one." (Psa 14:1-3, 53:1-3, Ecc 7:20)

<sup>13</sup>"Their throat is an open grave;

they use their tongues to deceive." (Ps 5:9)

"The venom of asps is under their lips." (Ps 140:3)

14 "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." (Ps 10:7)

15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

16 in their paths are ruin and misery,

17 and the way of peace they have not known." (Isa 59:7-8)

18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Ps 36:1)

## Total Depravity - Found & Defined

Are we sinners because we commit sins, or do we commit sins because we are sinful at our core being? In other words, does the act of sinning make us sinners, or are we sinners by nature from which the act of sinning flows? If the first were true, we could conceive of such a thing as perfect people—those who have decided not to commit sins, lest they take on the label of sinner. But who has ever done this? No one except Jesus

Nobody is perfect. Most accept that without appeal. But as we say this, we must recognize we are allowing for such a thing as perfection to exist, aren't we? If we accept we all fall short of perfection, doesn't that necessarily require that we believe there is such a thing as a perfect moral standard? Here we've entered the deep waters of moral absolutes. Is there a standard of rightness that is perfectly right, and if so, what or who sets the terms of what that looks like? The answer is that God alone is perfect, and thus He is the standard for righteousness.

We, Paul tells us, are not. And the reason we aren't is because we don't seek God. We've all turned aside. Our imperfection, Paul teaches, has everything to do with how we relate to God. It is not the result of failing to live up to some impersonal moral standard no one can reach. Our sinfulness is in our nature and it is against God. There isn't one single part of us that escapes.

When we talk about someone being totally depraved, we mean man's nature is sinful and corrupt throughout. We don't mean that people are as sinful as they can possibly be—murdering everyone they meet. In fact, we know even Paul recognized and was grateful for the "good" acts of many in his letters. (ex: Onesiphorus, Prisca and Aquilla in 2 Timothy)

RC Sproul makes the distinction between **utter** depravity—meaning we're just as sinful as we could possibly be—and **total** depravity: "To be totally depraved is to suffer from corruption that pervades the whole person. Sin effects every aspect of our being: the body, the soul, the mind, the will and so forth. The whole, or total person is corrupted by sin."

The result of this radical corruption in us is that we are, on our own, unable to do anything to improve our spiritual condition—salvation included. Sure believers and unbelievers alike do noble acts, but the minute we hope to apply them to count toward our righteous standing before God, somehow making us holy, every selfish motive will be exposed, and even our noble acts will appear filthy in the light of God's perfection.

Mankind wasn't created this way, but we became this way inheriting our first parent's sin and rebellion against God—*"plunging themselves and the entire race into spiritual ruin. [Adam] lost for himself and his descendants the ability to make right choices in the spiritual realm."* (Steele, p. 25) The doctrine of man's depravity comes from a logical line of passages, events and consequences found in Scripture. David Steele and Curtis Thomas distilled that line down to these five bullets: (The follow points are quoted directly from Steele and Thomas' helpful little book entitled "The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended and Documented.")

1. **SPIRITUAL DEADNESS:** As the result of Adam's transgression, men are born in sin and by nature are spiritually dead; therefore, if they are to become God's children and enter His Kingdom, they must be born anew of the Spirit.
  - a. When Adam was placed in Eden, he was warned not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil on threat of immediate spiritual death. (Gen 2:16-17)
  - b. Adam disobeyed and ate of the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:1-7); consequently, he brought spiritual death upon himself and upon the race. (Rom 5:12, Eph 2:1-3, Col 2:13)
  - c. David confessed that he, as well as all other men, was born in sin. (Ps 51:5, 58:3)
  - d. Because all men are born in sin and are by nature spiritually dead, Jesus taught that men must be born anew if they are to enter God's Kingdom. (Jn 3:5-7)
2. **DARKENED MINDS AND CORRUPT HEARTS:** As the result of the fall, men are blind & deaf to Spiritual truth. Their minds are darkened by sin; their hearts are corrupt and evil. (Gen 6:5, 8:21, Ecc 9:3, Jer 17:9, Mk 7:21-23, Jn 3:19, Rom 8:7-8, 1 Cor 2:14, Eph 4:17-19, Eph 5:8, Tit 1:15)
3. **BONDAGE TO SIN AND SATAN:** Before sinners are born into God's Kingdom through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, they are children of the devil, under his control; slaves to sin. (Jn 8:44, Eph 2:1-2, 2 Tim 2:25-26, 1 Jn 3:10, 1 Jn 5:19, Jn 8:34, Rom 6:20, Tit 3:3)
4. **UNIVERSAL BONDAGE:** The reign of sin is universal; all men are under its power; consequently none is righteous—not even one! (2 Chron 6:36, Job 15:14-16, Ps 130:3, 143:2, Prov 20:9, Ecc 7:20, 29, Isa 53:6, 64:6, Rom 3:9-12, Jas 3:2, 8, 1 Jn 1:8, 10)
5. **INABILITY TO CHANGE:** Men left in their dead state are unable of themselves to repent, to believe the Gospel, or to come to Christ. They have no power within themselves to change their natures or to prepare for themselves salvation. (Job 14:4, Jer 13:23, Mt 7:16-18, Mt 12:33, Jn 6:44, 55, Rom 11:35-36, 1 Cor 2:14, 4:7, 2 Cor 3:5)

When Jesus tells us no one comes to the Father but by Him, and when we understand these words in light of the crippling problem of sin, rendering us spiritually dead, with darkened minds and hearts, in bondage to our sin and to the devil, and unable to save ourselves, we understand better what He would have to do in order to bring us to the Father. He would have to make us alive again. And by defeating death in our place, taking the full weight of God's wrath toward our sins upon Himself, this is precisely what He accomplished—life in His name, by His grace, setting us right with His Father, our Maker, forever. We needed a Savior—not just a little, but totally. And God has given us One. Next week we'll explore that more, but today I want to leave you with something else to think about.

We're not sinful because we commit sins. We commit sins because we are, at our core, sinful. Sin isn't about what God would like us to do and how we fail to do it, as though sin is just offensive because it violates some arbitrary set of rules God decided to draw up. Sin opposes who God is. He is Holy, and wants us to know Him in the context of perfect holiness. What God wants is for His people to be holy as He is. And we cannot make ourselves Holy. If He doesn't rescue us, we're lost.

Sin is always supremely relational, driving wedges between one another and God. God's anger burns toward sin. For the believer, Christ has taken God's wrath toward our sin upon Himself. But remember, He didn't do this by accepting our sin, or by turning a blind eye to it. He placed the full measure of His wrath toward us and our sin upon His own Son Jesus on the cross. If you embrace the Gospel today, it is because God has given you life in Christ—resuscitating you from a condition of spiritual death by way of Christ's resurrection from the grave, paying the wage and defeating the power of sin over you. Let that sober you, convict you and cause your heart to worship.