The Doctrine of Total Depravity  
Romans 3:9-20

INTRO

- Romans 3:9-20 marks the final paragraph of the Condemnation section of the book
  - 1:18-32 was the condemnation of the unrighteous
    - Everyone in the world is guilty in God’s eyes
    - These were Gentile people
    - Regardless of whether or not they had a Bible, they had a conscience and creation
  - 2:1-29 was the condemnation of the self-righteous
    - People with the Bible are guilty because they judged the pagans for sins they were doing themselves
    - These were largely Jewish people who were prototypical hypocrites
    - They were guilty before God
  - 3:1-8 was a series of 4 questions by hypothetical antagonists
    - People will do anything to not have to come to Christ empty handed and begging for mercy
    - But Paul shot down every single objection to condemnation
  - What he is going to do now in 3:9-20 is make a definitive statement upon the nature of all people everywhere regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliation
    - “Just in case I missed anyone, let’s just address the totality of global humanity.”
    - Paul isn’t going to have one original thought in this paragraph, he is going to quote Old Testament to make his point
    - To show that they state of humanity has always been depraved
    - This idea is nothing new

- This paragraph is one of the clearest depictions of the Doctrine of Total Depravity
  - If you had to guess, what would you say is the one aspect of the human experience that unites all people in all places and in all times?
    - People have said before: the desire for love, the need for companionship, the drive to invent, etc.
    - But it is none of those things
    - The only thing that is true of all people in all places and in all times is the fact that they are born and grow to live totally depraved, dead in their sins
    - Humans like to think they are basically good
    - Romans is going to tell us the opposite
  - Paul is going to tell you what you were before Christ exploded on to the scene in your life and radically saved you from your sin
    - Non-Christians need to hear this message because they are convinced that they are basically good
    - Christians need to hear this message because they are convinced they weren’t that bad before salvation
      - This is detrimental to Christian growth because if you think you were pretty good to start with you don’t care about your own sanctification right now
    - Christian also need to hear this so that they are clear on the reality of the people around them
      - Only an immature Christian expects unbelievers to behave as if they aren’t dead in their sins
And a Christian can appease themselves into evanglistic lethargy because they don’t think their neighbors are that bad

- R.C. Sproul: “Total depravity refers to the idea that our whole humanity is fallen. That is, there is no part of me that has not been affected in some way by the fall. Sin affects my will, my heart, my mind, and my body.”
  - Total depravity is not utter depravity
  - Utter depravity is to be as wicked as one could possibly be
  - Total depravity means we are sinfully corrupted in the totality of our being

- The Westminster Confession: “From this original corruption (the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden), whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.”

- I am convinced that a correct understanding to the doctrine of Total Depravity would exponentially increase the biblical understanding of any Christian
  - This doctrine has been so under taught and it has been to the detriment of the church
  - If you don’t understand total depravity then you will never understand God’s sovereign election of those who will be saved
    - If you don’t understand total depravity then you will never understand the role of the church in the world or with the government
    - If you don’t understand total depravity then you won’t ever get a grasp on parenting your own kids!
  - Until you understand the extent of your own sinfulness you may never come to fully worship God in His holiness
    - It is no coincidence that every other religion says that the power of salvation does indeed reside within each person if they will merely put it to work…
    - …and the Scriptures say the exact opposite
    - Don’t look within yourself to find any answers
    - All you will find within yourself is cold, dark hopelessness
    - You must look outside yourself, outside of creation to find the solution to that hopelessness within you

- In the next 13 verses there are going to be some blanket statements made
  - Paul is going to prove that he invented painting with a broad brush
  - Now, you as the listener have two choices:
    - 1) You can reject this as erroneous and untrue — and thus throw the whole Bible out with it
    - 2) You can receive it as true, despite any preconceived notions you may have
      - There is no third choice
  - This is why I said, weeks ago, you need to determine what you believe about Scripture before we start Romans
    - Because hard truths are coming
    - And when the Bible becomes inconvenient that’s when you separate those who hold to it as inerrant and those who don’t
    - Those who like it when its easy vs. who love God and know that anything He says is true, good, and beautiful
• And if you don’t put in the work to understand this paragraph then the next one won’t be very exciting for you
  o But if you DO put in the work to understand this paragraph and thus your own depravity
  o Then the next paragraph will like an oasis in the desert
  o Like roaring fire in the Arctic
  o Like seeing land when lost at sea

EXPOSITION

• v.9, “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”
  o Is there any category of human beings that has a moral leg up on any other category of human beings?
    ▪ Is there any race, creed, or nation that God sees as worse or better than the rest of humanity?
    ▪ No.
    ▪ All people everywhere in all times are under sin
  o There is no one who exists who is not or was not a slave to sin
    ▪ The will of a man or woman is bond to sin
    ▪ All are born into the bondage of their own sin
  o “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” - Ephesians 2:1-3
    ▪ Dead people can’t call out for help
      ▪ Dead people can’t tell the doctors what killed them
      ▪ They can’t cry out for the paramedics to bring the defibrillator
      ▪ A dead person can only be acted upon
      ▪ They cannot act upon themselves
    ▪ You weren’t just aimlessly walking around with no guidance before you were saved
      ▪ You were following the prince of the power of the air
      ▪ You were a slave to Satan
    ▪ You were a child of wrath
      ▪ You weren’t a blank slate
      ▪ You weren’t just a little dirty and needed a spiritual rinse
      ▪ You were wrath-bound through and through
    ▪ This is what it means to be “under sin”
      ▪ And it extends to all of mankind

• v.10-18 are what is called in the study of theology a “catena,” which is a chain or series of OT quotes
  o This is the longest citation of OT Scriptures in all of Paul’s letters
• **v.10.** "as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one;’"
  
  o **v.10-12** are quoted from Psalm 14:1-3
    
    o In and of themselves, no one contains adequate righteousness to save themselves from the wrath of God
    o God is so righteous that His righteous nature requires Him to require that same level of righteousness from us
      - That is a righteousness that you don’t have
      - That is a righteousness that you could never muster
    o No one is righteous — notice it doesn’t say “righteous enough”
      - Its not that your righteousness is substandard
      - **Its not that you were trying to drive a ’76 Ford Pinto into a NASCAR race and Jesus just gave you a stock car instead**
        - You didn’t even have a car
        - You didn’t even have legs
        - **In fact you were just dead and rotting on the track**
    o No one has any righteousness to speak of
      - “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” - Ecclesiastes 7:20
        - “Man by nature selfishly seeks only what is to his advantage; he can love only himself above all things; and that is the sum and substance of all transgression.” - Luther

• **v.11a.** “No one understands…”
  
  o Paul makes this statement crystal clear in 1 Corinthians 1:18
    - “For the word of cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”
  o “Understands” = “συνιημι”, “syniemi”, to have an intelligent grasp of something that challenges one’s thinking or practice
    - There exists no unbeliever who has an intelligent grasp upon biblical Christianity
    - This is true of even the most educated of atheists — read their books and see the frailty of their arguments and total lack of biblical understanding
  o No lost person is walking around with even an adequate understanding of God, His purposes, His nature, the nature of man, and the reconciliation between the two

• **v.11b.** “…no one seeks for God.”
  
  o If no one seeks for God then why on earth would anyone ever attempt to create and seeker-sensitive church?
    - Do you remember that movement from a few decades ago that swept through evangelicalism in America?
    - How did that turn out?
    - It turned out a bunch of churches full of unregenerate people tripping over themselves to accommodate their gathering to the prevailing winds of society
    - Church is for the “equipping the saints for the work of the ministry” according to Ephesians 4:11-12
    - And for the encouraging of Christians and spurring them on towards good works according to Hebrews 10:24-25
    - What a seeker-sensitive church does is starve the sheep to entertain the goats
And it is built off of an entirely unbiblical precedent…

No one is walking around on a Sunday morning seeking for Jesus all on their own initiative

- Jesus Himself told us that this is the case
- “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day…This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” - John 6:44, 65
- There are no seekers, there are only those who are tied to the other end of God’s rope
- If you find anyone in the process of coming to Jesus you have stumbled upon an act of God
- The Father brings people to Christ
- Smoke and lasers on stage, hipster coffee shops in the lobby, and watered down sermons DON’T bring anyone to Christ

No one will come to God of their own volition, because that would make them a seeker

- And humanity is far too depraved to seek for God
- Though they may vapidly seek the benefits that come from God, they will not seek God Himself
- They will not come to God unless God Himself draws them
- “No one in his natural condition seeks for God. Seeking after God is the business of the believer. The moment we become a Christian is the moment when our quest for God begins. Prior to our conversion we were fugitives from God; we fled from him.” - R.C. Sproul

v.12a, “All have turned aside; together they have become worthless…”

- There exists no unbeliever who is “on the path” toward God
  - Everyone without Christ has turned off of the narrow way
  - “All we like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way…” - Isaiah 53:6
- This is a corporate behavior, “all” and “they”
  - In the OT, when God is describing the sinful group dynamics of a people He says,
  - “And everyone did what was right in their own eyes…” in Judges and Deuteronomy
- Groups of unregenerate people do not drift toward heaven, they sprint away from it
  - Isn’t what happened at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11?
  - Instead of obeying God and filling the earth, they rebelled and stayed clumped together
  - This led to a national rejection of God and embracing of worldly wisdom
  - **This is true in our own country isn’t it? Both coasts are liberal and progressively sinful and the same is true for any metropolitan area. But in rural areas, the trends to be far more conservative.**
- All people together are radically fallen

v.12b, “…no one does good, not even one.”

- How many people do good? No one, not even one person does good
- I am often asked the classic apologetic question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”
  - Or the more aggressive, “If God is so powerful then why does He let bad things happen to good people?”
  - But the answer to both questions is the same:
Your thinking is flawed, as you are starting from an incorrect precept.
There are no good people
No bad thing has ever happened to a good person, because “no one does good, not even one.”

**But someone might say, “Oh no come Stu, you can’t just speak in such broad generalities. Clearly it’s true that when a single mom working three jobs and trying to raise her kids in church has a tree fall her house that is means that bad things do happen to good people.”**
To that I’d say, “That kind of a woman is surely behaving nobly. But would it be impossible for me to find somebody more noble? Couldn’t I also find someone less reputable?

So then what is your definition of “good”?
It sounds like your definition is relative

God’s definition is perfect and immovable

“For a work to be considered good it must not only conform outwardly to the law of God, but it must be motivated inwardly by a sincere love for God.” - Sproul
And no unsaved person can do that

Jesus Himself reinforced this in Luke 18:19 talking to the rick young ruler

“And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.’”

No one is born fundamentally good

David said he was conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity in Psalm 51:5
He was a sinner from conception
From the zygote he was categorically not good

v.13, “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips.”
This is a medley of Psalms 5:9 and 140:3
Down in the depths within them there is nothing but death
And as an open grave only the stench of death comes out of them
Lying is paired with death here
Jesus used both of these images to describe the unrepentant Jews

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness.” - Matthew 23:27

“You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” - John 8:44
And unsaved person is not merely benign or uneducated
They are full of lies and death
Worthy of condemnation

v.14, “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”
This is quoted from Psalm 10:7
The language of the unregenerate is described here as being foul and evil
A curse was a proclamation of something evil
Bitterness is harsh, reprehensible, difficult to stomach

**I often walk around the little league fields over here. They have a sign of rules posted out front. The last rule is “No foul language.”**
I find it interesting that that rule needs no explanation
In our context everyone knows what words that sign is forbidding
But yet, I bet if you went to a little league game you would still here those words
Because plenty of unbeliever go to those games and foul language is a mark of unbelief

Which is why it is confounding to the Scriptures that a Christian person would be marked by foul language
Somehow along the way Christian today decided that foul language was no longer something they needed to resist
Unless of course they are at a Tomball Little League game
I’ve heard all of the pathetic philosophical arguments for why it doesn’t matter if you use profanity as a Christian
“Language is an arbitrary institution constructed to convey meaning, and four little letters stuck together has no more meaning than that which the speaker choses to give it.”
And yet, our godless radio and TV producers have determined that certain words are acceptable for the general public to hear and others are not
How can the church possibly be morally outpaced by the culture in this?
How can the little league fields have higher standards than the church across the street?
A reprehensible tongue is a characteristic of the condemned
They can speak no other language

v.15, “Their feet are swift to shed blood;”

v.15-17 are quoted from Isaiah 59:7-8
A people who are eager to shed blood are not a people who have washed in Christ’s blood
- It is nearly impossible to not see Islamic jihadists in this verse
- When shedding blood pleases your god then your god is of this world and his name is Lucifer

v.16-17, “in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.”
Those without Christ have no peace and they bring no peace
- They can only contribute misery to common places of society
Just look at social media
- Are those places that you would describe as peaceful?
- What types of posts are the most popular?
  - The ones with cute babies or Bible verses?
  - Or the ones with anger and shouting?
- Are you set at ease after 45 minutes of glaring at your personal black rectangle?
- Or is it a crossroads of ruin and misery because the vast majority of its users don’t know the God of the Bible?

v.18, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”
Quoting from Psalm 36:1
No matter what they say when they receive a Grammy, if they don’t have a life that is the opposite of v.9-17 then they are not a Christian
Unbelievers do not fear God
- “Well he isn’t a Christian, but he is still a God-fearing man.”
- No he is not.
The natural man has no sense of reverence, awe, or respect for the God of the Bible
And even worse, he is more afraid of humans than he is of God.

- They aren’t worried in the least about God’s displeasure with them
  - If you do not have the righteousness of Christ imputed upon you because your trust is in Him alone

  - Then you are not saved and you do not fear God
  - This goes for the so-called “Christian cults” of Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witness too, friendly as they may appear
  - They do not fear God

- Now if you were to hear this entire paragraph and be tempted to speak up…
  - …saying, “That stuff may be true for some people, but it isn’t true for me.”
  - Then the OT moral law would be brought up by God to silence you

- **v.19.** “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world maybe held accountable to God.”
  - Those who were given the law of God, the nation of Israel, were utterly incapable of keeping it
    - Their depravity reached so deeply within them that even with a flawless manual to pleasing God, they could not stop themselves from sinning radically
  - This reality shuts every mouth of anyone trying to claim that they aren’t like the people described in v.9-18
    - Because the test group couldn’t do it, then it extends to the rest of the population as well
    - Depravity cannot be over come by law
    - And those who failed to keep the law make it to where the entire earth is accountable to God for their own depraved actions
  - Our mouths will be shut on judgment day because all God is going to have to do is plug your brain into a projector and let your own internal recording device unquestionably condemn you

- **v.20a.** “For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight…”
  - “Human being” here is the Greek word “σαρξ” - “sarx” which literally means “flesh"
    - This alludes back to Genesis 6:12
    - “And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.”
  - There is no salvation through obedience to the law because man is utterly incapable of obeying it
    - Humans lack the will and ability to obey perfectly
  - Well if that is all true, that the law just makes us accountable to God, then what was the purpose of the law?
    - If the law can’t save anyone, then why give it at all?

- **v.20b.** “…since through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”
  - The purpose of the law is to show you your sin
    - The law and you inability to keep it makes you savable
    - Because you are made acutely aware of your need of a Savior
  - The end of the law is Calvary’s Hill
Those who received the law were supposed to throw up their hands in frustration after failing continually to obey it. They were supposed to end up at Golgotha where the blood of Christ dripped to the ground from the cross. And every drop cried out as it fell, “It is finished, your sins are forgiven.”

The law, and consequently all other religions, are swimming lessons for drowned men. People that are drowned on the bottom of the pool don’t need a swim coach showing them the back stroke from the deck. They need a Miracle Worker who can pull them up off the bottom and breathe new life into dead bodies.

**CONCLUSION**

- If you don’t know Christ this may be the most important passage of Scripture you have ever read
  - You are not righteous
  - You are not good
  - You are on the wrong path
  - You do not move towards God
  - You need help
    - Divine help
    - The help of One who is morally perfect and can robe you in His perfection
    - The help of One who was sacrificed so that your insurmountable moral debt could be forgiven
  - In order to be prepared to receive the gospel you need to be convinced of the weight of your sin
    - Your excuse making mouth needs to be silenced
    - And you must be prostrated at the stool of mercy
    - Knowing that if you are to be saved at all, it will be by the actions of another and not yourself

- Christians, we need to hear this passage in its fullness as well
  - “Christians sometimes speak of being “shocked” by this or that kind of behavior. We should certainly never hesitate to say that something is wrong, if it is wrong. But how can we be “shocked” or surprised about the sins of others when we are morally corrupt ourselves in God’s sight? If we truly understand how sinful each of us is in God’s sight, then we will understand that we are on the same level with everyone else. In terms of our sin nature, we have all been cut down to the same size.” - Francis Schaeffer