

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Total Depravity

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. 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.” —*Ephesians 2:1-3*

A. Key Terms and Definitions

1. **“Sin” (review).** “Sin is any lack of conformity¹ to God’s will in attitude, thought, or action, whether committed actively or passively. The center of all sin is autonomy, which is the replacing of God with self” (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 454).
 - **1 John 3:4** – “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.”
 - Sin is the response, “My will be done” rather than “Thy will be done.”
2. **“Hamartiology.”** The common Greek word for “sin” is *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία). “Hamartiology” is therefore defined as “the study of sin.”
 - *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία, “sin”) + *logos* (λόγος, “word, study”) = *hamartiology*, the study of sin.
3. **“Total Depravity.”** “Total depravity emphasizes the devastating impact of sin on the person and covers three related concepts: (1) the pollution and corruption of all aspects of a person; (2) the complete inability of a person to please God; and (3) universality, in that all are conceived and born as sinners” (MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 467). These three concepts will form the main points of the outline below.

“Total depravity means the entire absence of holiness, not the highest intensity of sin. A totally depraved man is not as bad as he can be, but he has not holiness, that is, no supreme love of God. He worships and loves the creature rather than the creator (Rom 1:25)” (Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2.257).

- The doctrine of **original sin**: man’s guilty *position* (sinners by nature; guilty by nature).
- The doctrine of **total depravity**: man’s guilty *practice* (sinners by behavior; guilty by behavior).

The Bible is filled with references to the depravity of mankind. It is described in every book of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. It is emphasized in each of the sections of Scripture (Law, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation). It is the easiest doctrine to establish from the biblical witness. Key texts include:

- Genesis 6:5, 11-12
- 1 Kings 8:46
- Job 5:7
- Proverbs 20:9
- Ecclesiastes 7:20
- Jeremiah 17:9
- Mark 7:21-23
- Romans 1:18-32; 3:9-18
- Ephesians 2:1-3; 4:17-19
- Titus 1:15

“Certainly, if this doctrine is clearly elucidated, it is daily confirmed by everyone’s experience and vindicated by the witness of its opponents themselves” ~ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.120

¹ The phrase “lack of conformity” is used here to encompass both active, aggressive forms of opposition to God’s will, as well as passive failures to measure up to His standards.

B. Comprehensive Corruption

This is the first aspect of the doctrine of total depravity, according to the definition of MacArthur and Mayhue (see above): “(1) the pollution and corruption of all aspects of a person.”

1. The Corruption of Man’s Essence

- (a) Man’s *material* existence. Man’s *body* evidences the corruption of sin through its involvement in sinful acts, and its experience of the consequences of death.
- (b) His *immaterial* existence. Man’s *soul* evidences the corruption of sin in that every component of his immaterial existence is described by Scripture as sinful:

- Mind (Eph 4:17-19)
- Heart (Gen 6:5)
- Will (John 8:34)
- Conscience (Titus 1:15)
- Affections (John 3:19)
- Desires (Rom 1:24-27)

“We are so entirely controlled by the power of sin, that the whole mind, the whole heart, and all our actions are under its influence.” —Calvin, *Romans*, 261

“Man’s nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols.” —Calvin

2. The Corruption of Man’s Relationships

- (a) Man is inclined to *hate God*. Man’s depravity makes him—by nature and by choice—an enemy of God. He may certainly love other “gods,” but he hates the one true God. Man’s existence is an existence lived *at enmity* with his Creator.
 - Romans 8:8; Ephesians 2:1-3; 4:18
- (b) Man is inclined to *hate his neighbor*. Because he is at enmity with God, man is consequentially at enmity with those who bear God’s image. From his birth, man actively creates strife with others around him. Man is inherently *violent*. It began in the Garden of Eden with the consequences of sin in the first marriage (Gen 3:16), and quickly manifested itself in Cain’s murder of Abel (Gen 4).
 - Note how many of the “deeds of the flesh” in Galatians 5:19-21 are inter-personal vices.

3. The Corruption of Man’s Existence

- (a) Man *is dead* spiritually. He is unresponsive to spiritual truth; he is void of a true desire for God.
 - Ephesians 2:1-5
- (b) Man *is dying* physically. Man’s ambition to find the spring of eternal life will always prove futile. No one escapes the reality of physical death.
 - Genesis 3:19 (see 5:5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 27, 21); Psalm 90:10; Hebrews 9:27
- (c) Man *will die* eternally. Apart from a radical change of condition, man’s sin and guilt legally merit an eternity of punishment in the lake of fire, hell.
 - Revelation 20:11-15

C. Complete Inability

This is the second aspect of the doctrine of total depravity, according to the definition of MacArthur and Mayhue (see above): “(2) the complete inability of a person to please God.”

It must be noted that complete inability does not mean every man lives out his sinfulness to the fullest extent, or that he is not capable of relatively good works. As Bavinck states,

The teaching of Scripture, after all, is not that every human lives at all times in all possible actual sins and is in fact guilty of violating all God’s commandments. It only refers to the deepest inclination, the innermost disposition, the fundamental directedness of human nature and confesses that it is not turned toward God but away from him. (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.120).

In fact, unregenerate mankind can establish a kind of righteousness—as the Jews have done (see Rom 10:1-3). “Evil fathers” can give their children “good gifts” (Matt 7:11). Atheists can be very civil and polite. Members of false religions can make great neighbors. Unbelievers can have good marriages and raise respectable children. Non-Christian soldiers can give their lives for their countries in dramatic acts of sacrifice and courage. But this outward display of virtue (which is common) does not mean the underpinning motive is pure.

- Augustine described the virtues of unregenerate men as “splendid vices.” They look nice on the outside, but they are corrupt at their root. They are the right works done for the wrong reasons.

The extent of human depravity is also limited by authority structures (the family unit, civil society, government – Rom 13) as well as God’s own providential activity (note the “restrainer” mentioned in 2 Thess 2).

Rather, complete inability relates to three primarily elements:

- (a) Man cannot accept or understand the things of God. Man is intellectually and morally biased against truth.

- 1 Corinthians 2:14; Romans 1:18

- (b) Man cannot do the kind of works that are pleasing to God. Indeed, man is capable of many deeply religious, charitable, and even sacrificial works. But these are not done by and from faith in God’s promises.

- John 15:5; Romans 3:10-12; 8:6-8.

“Good, true good—good in the eyes of a holy God—is only what is done out of faith, according to God’s law, and to God’s glory. . . . Weighed in the scales of God’s sanctuary, all their works are found to be wanting.” —Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.123

- (c) Man cannot make himself right before God. Man is utterly unable—and unwilling—to change his own spiritual condition.

- Jeremiah 13:23; John 3:1-15

D. Universal Extent

This is the third aspect of the doctrine of total depravity, according to the definition of MacArthur and Mayhue (see above): “(3) universality, in that all are conceived and born as sinners.”

Scripture is unequivocal on this point: all mankind—with the exception of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 7:26)—are depraved.

- Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:10-12 (citing Psalm 14:1-3 and 53:1-3); 3:23

“If anything is certain, it is certainly that humans are conceived and born not as saints but as sinners. This indicates that they have one and the same guilty in common with Adam, for in sin, guilt and pollution always go together.” —Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.109

E. The Need for a Remedy

Radical depravity calls for a radical solution. Nothing less will do. Only that which is equally as comprehensive and equally as powerful can rescue man from his plight. This is exactly what the gospel is.

“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.” —1 Timothy 1:15-16

“It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick” —Matthew 9:12

**“I do not come to Christ although I am a sinner. I come to Christ because I am a sinner.”
—Robert Murray M ‘Cheyne**

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: Romans 3:23

Recommended Reading: MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 451-468.

Homework:

- In your own words, describe the doctrine of total depravity. Include its three main components. How would you explain it to a child?
- Why is that only a profound sense of guilt can lead one effectively to trust in Jesus Christ’s offer of the gospel? How does a high view of man (that he is only sick, or not really that bad) keep one from embracing the true gospel?
- What makes the difference between a good work (such as charitable giving, prayer, fasting, Bible reading, acts of kindness to one’s neighbor, church attendance, resisting temptation) which *does not* please God and one that *does*? How would you explain this to a deeply religious (but lost) person?
- Study Paul’s brief testimony in 1 Timothy 1:12-16. Consult a good Study Bible or commentary. How was man’s radical depravity illustrated in Paul’s life? How was God’s radical response demonstrated? Explain.
- Take time this week to read/sing through the hymns we sang at tonight’s meeting: “God Be Merciful to Me” (*Hymns of Grace* #390); and “All I Have Is Christ” (*Hymns of Grace* #389). Use them as tools to help you acknowledge to God your past radical depravity, but also his radical work of mercy and grace in your life.

Hymns: “Amazing Grace” (*Hymns of Grace* #89); “Not in Me” (*Hymns of Grace* #405).

This Week’s Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: September 25 (Evening of Prayer)