

## Total Depravity

*Text: Romans 3:9-26; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 2*

*Speaker: Rev. Angus Stewart*

Let us hear the verdict of Almighty God, who knows what is in man:

“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5).

“The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies” (Ps. 58:3).

“Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9).

“You... were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1).

The *Heidelberg Catechism* confirms: “I am prone by nature to hate God and my neighbour” (Q&A 5). Then Q&A 8: “Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness? Indeed we are, except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.”

The doctrine described by both Scripture and catechism is *total depravity*. It means all mankind—excluding Christ—is depraved in every part: thoughts, will, emotions, heart, and mind. It also means all of mankind is depraved: Jew and Gentile, old and young, male and female. The Fall corrupted every human faculty.

### The Meaning

Romans 3:9–18 lays this out. First, man is not righteous: “There is none righteous, no, not one” (v. 10). Not even one human being, measured against God’s holy law, is upright. We are twisted and perverse. Solomon puts it: “God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions” (Eccl. 7:29).

Second, man has no true understanding: “There is none that understandeth” (v. 11). This does not deny man’s grasp of natural things—language, money, cooking, engineering—but means he lacks *spiritual* understanding. He cannot truly know God. Though he may read Scripture or earn a degree in theology, he has no *heartfelt, saving, spiritual* grasp. “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God... they are *spiritually* discerned” (I Cor. 2:14).

Third, man’s will is also depraved: “There is none that seeketh after God” (v. 11). Seeking is *willing, desiring*. The unregenerate seek false religion, moralism, self-justification, and even hell-avoidance—but not *God*. As Jesus said, “Men loved darkness rather than light” (John 3:19). This is total inability. If repentance and faith are acts of seeking God, and “there is none that seeketh,” then none can believe without grace.

Christ says it too: “No man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father” (John 6:65). Faith is God’s gift. That crowd left Him upon hearing it. But the elect say, “This is true; this was me.”

So there never has been, nor will there ever be, anyone who seeks God without sovereign, irresistible grace. Total depravity entails total inability—man cannot come, because he will not.

## **The Implications**

Paul continues: “Their throat is an open sepulchre” (Rom. 3:13). The image is one of a decaying corpse—man’s throat emits the stench of death. “With their tongues they have used deceit.” Lies about God, self, sin, eternity, all flow naturally. “The poison of asps is under their lips.” The human mouth, like a serpent’s, spreads death. “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness” (v. 14). These are violations of the third and ninth commandments. The world manufactures substitute ethical codes to distract from the true standard of God’s law.

Then the apostle shifts to the feet: “Their feet are swift to shed blood” (v. 15). The sixth commandment is broken in thought and in deed. Man hates, wishes destruction, and acts with alacrity. “Destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace have they not known” (vv. 16–17). Peace is foreign to him. He despises godly order, Christian living, and gospel harmony. He scorns the quiet life of faith as dull, boring, or restrictive.

Finally, the eyes: “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (v. 18). Man lacks reverence. He does not see God nor interpret anything in God’s light. Modern

technology grants the depraved heart instant access to sin. With unrestrained eyes, man plunges deeper into his rebellion. The body – throat, tongue, lips, mouth, feet, and eyes – serves as the instrument of sin.

Romans 3 teaches not only man's nature but also his deeds. "They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (v. 12). Total depravity means that even man's apparent good works are not truly good. "Whatsoever is not of faith is *sin*" (Rom. 14:23). Outwardly helpful acts are done without faith and not to God's glory. They are glittering vices – appearing virtuous, but abominable to God. "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6).

Total depravity means slavery to sin. "They are all under sin" (Rom. 3:9). Sin is man's master. He obeys it willingly and cannot free himself. Christ said, "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" (John 8:34). Peter wrote, "Of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought into bondage" (II Pet. 2:19). Man is enslaved, unable and unwilling to escape.

This doctrine, properly grasped, exalts Christ. This is why God sent His Son. Salvation cannot come from man, and only the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). Before conversion, we found Christ dull and His yoke heavy. But Jesus said, "My yoke is easy" (Matt. 11:30). Total depravity blinds us to that. People turn to Islam, cults, and secularism – anything but Christ. That is the fruit of this bondage.

Paul says this depravity is *universal*: "We have before proved *both Jews and Gentiles*, that they are all under sin" (Rom. 3:9). Rich and poor, religious and secular, infant and aged, all are guilty. And if that's true, then Romans 3 must be evaded by those unwilling to submit. So many resort to faulty arguments.

Some say, "But man has a conscience!" He does. Conscience warns against wrong. A man may resist temptation to steal because of conscience. But even that refusal, if done apart from faith, is sin (Rom. 14:23). The act may benefit society, but it is not a *good* work. Conscience is necessary to make man morally accountable, but it does not refute total depravity.

Others speak of "common grace": "Without it, man would be as bad as Romans 3 describes – but he's not, so this is a hypothetical that doesn't apply." Yet Paul is not painting hypotheticals. He speaks of *real people*: *Jews and Gentiles*. If the text refers to no actual man, then it is pointless. Moreover, Scripture never teaches a "grace" that restrains sin without saving. God has *one* grace – the grace in Christ that saves, regenerates, and justifies.

Some say Romans 3 is “hyperbole.” But if this is mere overstatement, then so are Psalms 14, 53, 5, 10, 140; Isaiah 59; and the rest of Scripture quoted here. And if this is exaggerated, why not Romans 4 on justification? Romans 5 on original sin? Romans 6–8 on sanctification and assurance? If everything is hyperbole, then why didn’t Paul just tell us the *truth*? This is the Spirit’s assessment of fallen humanity, not rhetorical flourish.

The real purpose of this doctrine is explained in verse 19: “That every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.” God’s Word silences human excuses. We are shown our helplessness, so that we may seek righteousness outside ourselves.

“Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (v. 20). The law strips us bare. It convicts the conscience, leaving no hope in man. Here is the pivot: “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested... even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe” (vv. 21–22). Justification is God’s free gift through Christ, apart from law-keeping. We are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (v. 24).

Only when the doctrine of total depravity is clear do we truly cling to Christ crucified. Only then do we see that there is no other way to be right with God. And then, out of gratitude, we begin to walk in good works – not to merit grace, but to thank God for what He freely gave.

*Our Father in heaven, bless to us Thy Word, and bless to us the sacrament which teaches the same truth, that we may deny ourselves and understand Thy free sovereign grace in Jesus Christ. Send deliverance to us, Lord God, and our children. Deliver us that we may be faithful and walk in newness of life. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*