

## "TOTAL DEPRAVITY"

(Romans 1:18-3:20)

(John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue)

The Bible teaches what has been called total (or pervasive) depravity to describe the corruption and pollution of sin passed down from Adam. 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. Together these show the abysmal state of unredeemed humanity, all of whom are both unable and unwilling to glorify God.

Total depravity does not mean that unsaved people always act as badly as possible. Nor does it mean that unsaved people cannot do relative acts of goodness. Unbelievers can do good things for society, their friends, and their family. They can stop a fight, give to charity, perform life-saving surgery. They can help a lost child find her parents. These acts have a relative goodness, which corresponds with what Jesus said: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children . . ." (Matt. 7:11).

Concerning the first feature, sin is total or pervasive in that all components of a person are polluted by sin. Just as smoke from a fire permeates everything in a room, the whole person is corrupted by sin. No part of a man escapes. This includes both material and immaterial aspects of a person—body and soul. The body decays and is headed for physical death, and along the way, the body functions as an instrument for evil activity. The spiritual part of man is also fully corrupt. This includes all of man's thinking, reason, desires, and affections. Thus Paul concludes, "To the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled" (Titus 1:15). Speaking of the godless, Paul refers to "the futility of their minds" (Eph. 4:17). The heart is also debased; so Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" Jesus also teaches that it is from the heart that wicked deeds occur (Mark 7:21-23). On multiple occasions the Bible addresses both corrupt thinking and an evil heart. Paul said, "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart" (Eph. 4:18). Also, sinful mankind "became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). John Calvin rightly stated, "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."

Second, sin is total in that man is incapable of pleasing God on his own. Paul states, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile towards God, for he does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:7-8). And Jesus says, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Third, sin is universal in that all humans are sinners. First Kings 8:46 declares, "For there is no one who does not sin." And Psalm 14:3 states, "They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one." The entire section of Romans 1:18-3:20 is dedicated to showing that all people are sinners and unable to save themselves, concluding that, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

Therefore, man's spiritual state is not one of relative neutrality, in which he is able to except or reject God and his gospel. He is an active hater of God (Rom. 8:7) who cannot accept spiritual truth (1 Cor. 2:14). The total depravity of man demonstrates the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation. Man can do nothing. God must accomplish all as a gift of sovereign grace.

