

**“Total Depravity”**  
**Romans 3:9-20**  
**October 30, 2022**

---

**INTRODUCTION:**

Advances in medical science involve not just better treatments, but also better diagnostics. Medical conditions can be effectively treated only when an accurate diagnosis is made. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah spoke of this in the spiritual realm when he condemned the false prophets of Israel. **“They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace”** (Jer. 8:11). We would say, “You’re trying to treat a gaping wound with a band-aid.” Jeremiah had been prophesying that Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonian army. The false prophets were proclaiming a different message, saying that while it may be true that there were some problems, it was not nearly so dire a situation as Jeremiah was portraying and would end peacefully. I wonder what those false prophets were saying when the Babylonian army was tearing down their walls and ransacking their temple.

Paul has been doing something similar in these early chapters of Romans, warning us against healing our wounds lightly. For over two chapters he has been laboring to make clear our true diagnosis. The essential human problem is sin. Unless this diagnosis is accepted, there will never be any hope of solving our main problem. Today’s passage makes a point about this that is new. Paul has previously made the point that every social group is guilty, naming specifically Jews and Gentiles. Lest some think that they may be exceptional in that they aren’t personally guilty even if they belong to a group that is, Paul makes the point in today’s passage that every single member of every group is also guilty. In theology, this often comes under the heading referred to as “total depravity.” Our passage develops this idea in a way that can be summarized under three assertions.

**I. Everyone Is a Sinner**

Paul makes the point in verse 9 that no advantage is conferred by the group to which a person belongs. Both Jews and Greeks, he says, are “under sin.” To be under sin means to be under its authority, whereby a person feels powerless to refuse sin’s demands. There is an addictive quality to sin. Even if a person acknowledges the personal damage sin is doing, stopping it feels impossible. Like addiction, sin flourishes by our desires to master it. We try to overcome a sin, fail to do so, and then in despair look again to the sinful behavior to comfort our despair at our failure. The porn addict seeks comfort through his habit, but then feels guilty and tries to stop. But eventually he fails and slips back into his sinful habit. He feels bad about that, and seeks comfort again

through just one more voyeuristic episode. Sin's grip increases each time. Someone has said that "addiction taps into longing the way a blackmailer might garnish your wages. Every time you meet a demand, it escalates." That is what it looks like to be under sin's authority.

Paul establishes the truthfulness of his negative outlook on sin's power by quoting from the Old Testament. He believed that the Bible was the ultimate and reliable source of all truth, and he quotes from seven different passages to make his point that everyone is a sinner. Note the emphasis given to individuals. It's not just social groups that are under sin, but every single individual within those groups. Note how many times he emphasizes this in verses 10-12. **"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."**

It is important to recognize that Paul locates the heart of our sinful nature in our attitude toward God. These texts begin and end with statements about the sour relationship between God and his image bearers. No one seeks God, and all have turned aside (v. 11-12). The idea of that phrase to turn aside is that people steer clear of God. Imagine being at your local grocery store and you turn down an aisle and notice at the end of the aisle someone with whom you've had a falling out, but that person doesn't see you. What do you do? Most people would steer clear, turning around in order to avoid an encounter. Paul is saying here that this is what we do with God. We just avoid him. Sometimes that avoidance is accomplished by creating a god more to our liking. We avoid the true God of the Bible while fashioning in our minds the kind of god we would prefer. And we do all this, Paul says in the last verse he quotes, with no fear of God before our eyes. We feel free to think and speak of God in any way we choose, with no thought that he might actually be the holy, almighty God of the Bible before whom we will all have to stand on Judgment Day.

John Dillman was a New Orleans police detective in the early eighties. In a book called *Unholy Matrimony: A True Story of Murder and Obsession*, he tells the story of a homicide he investigated. Two men hatched an insurance fraud scheme in which one of them scouted, courted and eventually married an innocent young woman. A generous life insurance policy was purchased, with this new husband as her beneficiary. Then, on their honeymoon, he coaxed his bride out for an evening walk, and at a predetermined point shoved her into the street where she would be run over by his partner in crime in his rental car. Shortly afterward, the life insurance money would be claimed by this "grieving" husband who had just suffered the tragic death of his new wife at the hands of a hit-and-run driver. When these men were caught, tried, and sentenced, Dillman noted their complete lack of sorrow for their crime. He wrote that they even complained about the way the police kept interfering in their lives by pursuing, interrogating, and charging them. They claimed that they were the real victims in this whole affair.

These two men were clearly sociopaths, and Paul is not suggesting that all of us have sunk to that level. But there is a sense in which there is something of the same brokenness in our relationship with God. We treat him poorly with absolutely no sense of having done anything wrong. If our nature were not so broken, we would seek the true God instead of steering clear of him.

Let's consider a negative application of this truth that everyone is a sinner, and that is that we should derive no comfort from this fact. Paul doesn't spend so much time on establishing the universal nature of sin so that we might say, "Well, it can't be that bad if everyone's doing it." Instead, the appropriate conclusion is that we are all headed to a well-deserved judgment by the Creator against whom we've rebelled, and no one will be an exception.

## II. Every Part of Everyone Is Sinful

The idea of total depravity is sometimes rejected because it is misunderstood to mean that people are totally evil. If that is what it meant, the evidence against it would be clear and obvious. By God's common grace, there is, to one degree or another, still a reflection of God's image in us all. Even the most vocal atheist can be a man or woman of great integrity. But total depravity doesn't mean that everyone is totally evil. Rather, it means that sin affects the total person. There is no part of us that is completely free of sin's effects.

Note how Paul in these verses mentions the different parts of a person. He refers to the mind when he says, "**No one understands,**" while human desires are in view when he says, "**no one seeks for God.**" Verse 12 highlights the human will by speaking of the many bad choices made. "**No one does good, not even one.**" Then verse 13 mentions the different parts of the body involved in human speech: the throat, tongue, lips and mouth. Verses 15-17 return to the choices we make by mentioning the feet, which are "**swift to shed blood.**" Finally, he mentions the eyes in verse 18: "**There is no fear of God before their eyes.**"

Let's consider sin's effects on just some of the parts of our humanity, beginning with the mind. "**No one understands,**" Paul says. It's not that sin lowers a person's IQ. There are many very intelligent people who are also very evil. But intelligence can make things worse for you if the intelligence is used to pursue illicit goals. A computer hacker may be quite intelligent as he plots how to steal money from others. His problem is that he has the wrong starting point, and intelligence that begins in the wrong place only serves to accelerate one's decline. His wrong starting point is self instead of God.

How about our heart's desires, indicated by Paul's statement that **"no one seeks for God."** The filmmaker Woody Allen in 1993 tried to explain his controversial affair with the young daughter of Mia Farrow. He said simply, "The heart wants what it wants." But that begs the question, why doesn't the heart want God? Why does no one seek for God? Because the human heart is deeply flawed by our sin, and we don't want God. The result of that is that **"together they have become worthless"** (v. 12). The word has the idea of something that is useless or unserviceable. The victim of a spinal cord injury has the nerve severed that controls the arms and/or legs, rendering them unserviceable. In rebelling against God's control of our lives, the human race has rendered itself unserviceable. The early church father, Athanasius, commented on the story of the fall into sin in Genesis 3. He noted that human beings, who were created out of nothing, corrupt ourselves back into nothing by our rebellion and mutiny against God.

A great deal of attention is given in this passage, and in the Bible as a whole, to sins of the tongue. Note the graphic nature of the first sentence of verse 13: **"Their throat is an open grave."** An open grave shows the ugliness of death, an ugliness we prefer to cover up. Imagine a family being forced to go to the grave of a loved one six months after burial. The grave and casket are opened, and the family is forced to look at the ugliness and decay. Just so, our words show the ugliness and decay of the human heart. The throat is the largest opening in the human body, providing a way to see inside. Metaphorically, the words that emerge from the throat show the darkness of the human heart. Jesus said it like this: **"How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks"** (Matt. 12:34).

What is Paul's example of a sin of the tongue that is like a decaying corpse? It is the common sin of deception. **"They use their tongues to deceive."** Consider some of the many common forms of deception. Exaggeration comes to mind. I remember years ago when our daughter was playing basketball, and I had a conversation with her coach. He was explaining the selection process for dividing up the girls on the team so that there would be equal skill levels among the teams. But the process had what proved to be a fatal flaw in that they asked the parents to rate the abilities of their daughters. Even though this was a church league, this coach said that the ratings were almost useless because the vast majority of parents rated their daughters as at least "above average." I remember seeing the same thing once in an application from a minister who was seeking a job in our presbytery. There was a place on the application that asked him to rate himself in twenty categories of pastoral activities. He had three options on the weakness side, three on the strength side, and an average rating in the middle. There was not a single item marked as weak, only two as average, and 18 spread out among the three different strength ratings. I don't know this man, but I doubt if it is really the case that

we have a candidate with absolutely no weaknesses and above average abilities in all but two pastoral categories.

Some might say, “Brad, you’re being too harsh. What’s the big deal with this? Doesn’t everyone do this?” The universal nature of this is Paul’s precise point. It’s a big deal because it shows in an everyday and very common way what rebellion against God looks like. It looks like making our own reality instead of trusting God for the reality that is.

### **III. Every Path to Restoration Blocked, Save One**

The last two verses of our text contain Paul’s summary of this whole section. It is that every mouth may be stopped. That statement has in view a court of law where a criminal has an opportunity to mount a defense. But in this case, there is no defense to be made. “Guilty as charged” is the only possible response.

Paul is seeking to close every path we humans are prone to take to deal with guilt over sin. Some people take the path of renouncing God’s just rule over us and just doing whatever they want. Paul closed the door to that path in chapter one by pointing out that God brings judgment upon those choosing this path. It is the horrible judgment of giving them over to their desires. He gives them what they want, but in their sin they want the wrong things and are brought to ruin by their own choices.

Beginning in chapter 2, Paul addresses the path of law-keeping. The religious person thinks that he or she only needs to do a better job of keeping the rules. Paul shuts the door completely on this option in verse 20. **“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”**

Because we are sinners, we all tend to take one of those paths. We either renounce God’s authority and do what we want, or we try to control God by our rule-keeping. Paul slams the doors to both options so that we might consider a better one. It is the only option leading to life because it’s the option God has provided in our Lord Jesus.

### **CONCLUSION:**

We celebrate communion today as those whose eyes have been opened to see that our only hope is in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. There is no other path. We are not angry with God for providing only one path, but deeply grateful that there is a path and that God has shown us the way through Jesus.

## **Discussion Questions**

### **Romans 3:9-20**

1. In these early chapters of Romans, Paul is attempting to keep us from the error highlighted by the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah when he condemned the false prophets of his era by saying, “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 8:11). What are some modern versions of “healing the wound of my people lightly”?
2. To be “under sin” (v. 9) is to be under its authority. In other words, we may think that we can control our sin, but sin is actually controlling us. How does sin seek to control us?
3. Is there an area of your life where you regularly experience the power of sin?
4. Paul says that “all have turned aside,” and the idea of that phrase is that all steer clear of God. They just avoid him. What are some ways people try to avoid God? What are some ways you seek to avoid God?
5. One of the chief evidences of a sinful heart is in one’s speech. A striking image in verse 13 is Paul’s linkage between something as grisly and offensive as an open grave and a deceitful tongue. How does this passage suggest we should think about “white lies” such as exaggeration and flattery?
6. What are some relevant examples of “curses and bitterness” (v. 14)?
7. Why do you think the Bible gives such emphasis to sins of the tongue? What sins of the tongue do you most struggle with?
8. To summarize, in these early chapters of Romans Paul is seeking to close off any path to restoration we might consider other than the true path found in Jesus. The two paths he has highlighted are the path of renouncing God’s rule by doing what we want, and the religious path that thinks we can earn God’s favor through our obedience. Are you more prone to one of those paths? How do you tend to use that path to avoid God? Take some time to review the truth of the gospel and remember what good news it is.