

### The Five Disputed Points of Calvinism: The “T” in TULIP- Total Depravity

John Newton was a good man. He was born in England in 1725. His dad was a sailor and by the time young John had reached the age of 17 he had accompanied his father on six different voyages.

Though he was a good man, John did have one black spot in his life-slave trading. He eventually became the captain of a ship that traded for slaves off the west coast of Africa. Slave trading would soon weigh heavily on John’s conscience. He began to feel empathy for them. He knew it was not right.

In 1748, while at sea, his slave ship encountered a storm and began to fill up with water. That night John was converted to the Christian faith. He would experience a deeper work of grace about a year later when he was stricken with fever, again while at sea. John swore off drinking, gambling, and cursing, and he began to study his Bible intensely, pray, and worship.

A few years later he would retire from sailing and eventually become a Christian minister in the Church of England. During that time God continued to work on him as it concerned slavery. Newton encouraged William Wilberforce, a member of the English Parliament and a recent convert to faith in Jesus Christ, to not quit parliament but to stay and work for the abolition of slavery.

In 1788 John Newton wrote a pamphlet on slavery that was widely distributed. In it, for the first time he made a public confession that he was wrong to trade slaves and that it was an immoral thing for his country to do. His reasoning was grounded in the Christian faith. He hated that he was once a slaved trader and he regretted that it took him so long to make a public apology.

John Newton was a good man who had come to see the error of his ways. He was also a hymn writer. His most famous hymn is Amazing Grace,

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a **wretch** like me. I was once was **lost**, but know I’m found, was **blind**, but now I see.”

There was a member in the previous church I served, who loved that hymn, expect for the first line. He did not like to think of himself as a “wretch.” He was a good man, not a wretch. He was nice man, not mean. Kind, not ugly. Moderate, not uncontrolled. Dignified, not uncouth. A Presbyterian, not a sinner!

He is not alone. Being called a sinner, or a wretch, is no longer popular in our world today.

In 1973 noted psychiatrist Carl Menninger wrote a book called *Whatever Happened to Sin?* What prompted him to write it was his frustration with the growing permissiveness and violence that was manifesting itself in the western world. This man was not even a Christian but he knew that something was wrong, bad wrong with society, and he was going to call an ace and ace. So

he named for what it was- sin and sinners, all of us, and he called on clergy to tackle the problem head on. Menninger is now dead and he would, I imagine, be saddened by our further slide into moral decadence and our continued softening of sin.

Today I am beginning my series of sermons on the five disputed points of Calvinism and today we are going to look at the doctrine of Total Depravity, which is really the doctrine of sin.

It is not the most disputed doctrine of the five points of Calvinism, for Limited Atonement is, but it is disputed, none-the-less, because not all Christians share Calvin's understanding of how sin affects people and to what degree it affects them. In fact, many people, even within Mainline Presbyterianism, have drifted far away from how their forefather in the faith understood this Biblical doctrine. Remember my friend who didn't take kindly to being called a wretch?

So on with the first point. The "T" in TULIP- Total Depravity.

Many people wonder why Presbyterians believe in the strange doctrine of predestination. Even some Presbyterians wonder why other Presbyterians believe in predestination! Truth is, many of us no longer believe in it, at least not in the way that it has been understood historically throughout our history. This would either be fortunate or unfortunate depending upon who you ask.

But I bring up this doctrine of predestination today because it is **necessitated** by the doctrine of total depravity.

In other words, there is no need for God to "choose" or "predestine" a person for salvation in Jesus Christ **unless** the doctrine of total depravity is true. For now, just keep that thought in the back of your mind and hopefully that statement will make more sense by the end of this sermon.

### **What Is Total Depravity? Who Does It Affect?**

Total depravity. What is it?

Total depravity, most broadly speaking, is basically the idea that people have a sinful **nature**. This means our nature is corrupt and inherently set against the purposes of God for our lives.

So when we talk about total depravity we are **not** just talking about **acts** of sin committed by people. It's not only like the old Adam Ant song that was so popular in the 80's, *Goody Too Shoes*, "Don't drink, don't smoke, goody too shoes." But it's more like the Human League song *I'm Only Human*. "I'm only human **born** to make mistakes. I'm only human, flesh and blood I'm made."

That song almost got it right. The only part wrong with it is that it is not human to be "born to make mistakes." It's actually subhuman, depraved, and corrupt. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden man and woman ceased to be fully human, they lost their humanity.

This is what we mean by total depravity- it is a sinful condition, **not a learned behavior**. David got it right. “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” (Psalm 53:5)

So **who** does this nature affect?

According to the Bible it affects **all** people.

Our text today from Romans 3:9-20 is the final nail in the first point that the apostle Paul sought to drive home in his letter to the Romans. He began that letter first with the bad news that “all people have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23)

It did not matter if one was a Jew or a Gentile, both had failed and were failures, and both were without excuse.

God gave the written law, the Old Testament, to the Jews and they failed, they rebelled against God. The Gentiles were given less revelation but it was still enough to condemn them because God had written his law on their consciences. For God has written his law inwardly on the heart of every human being. The Gentiles sinned against God despite this.

So here, in this text, Paul drives home the point that no one is righteous, not even close. No one, in his inherent, depraved state seeks God. No one does good. The poison of snakes is on the lips of **all** people. All people are swift to shed blood, either literally, or in their hearts. There is no fear of God in the eyes of anyone, anywhere.

This is the bleak condition that Paul lays out for humanity.

No one is excluded. Not blacks, not whites, not males, females, conservatives, liberals, Democrats, Republicans, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, New Agers, Scientologists, positive thinkers, agnostics, or atheists. Not even innocent little babies.

### **We Must Know the Bad News Before We Will Accept the Good News of Jesus**

Why such negative a spin by Paul? Because until a person truly understands the depths of his depravity and the severity of his situation before the eyes of a holy God, he will not acknowledge his need for a Savior.

Calvin, in his commentary on Isaiah 53:6 had this to say on the matter: “For unless we realize our own helpless misery, we shall never know how much we need the remedy which Christ brings, nor come to him with the fervent love we owe him.”

This means the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ **can not** exist first apart from the bad news about man’s sinful, depraved condition. If it could, then what would we need saving from?

Many people struggle with what the Bible teaches on this matter. In fact, you may be struggling with it. You might not believe what I just said to be true about yourself, and definitely not about

that “nice little old lady” who lives next door to you, or that little child, or that kind person who is always helping someone else. How could they be depraved? You might ask.

Here is a test for their and your depravity. Can you imagine if other people could crawl inside their heads and see all of the thoughts that run through their minds? Or how about your own? To get inside of their little “black boxes” and get a glimpse of their inner motives and thoughts? Indeed, it would be a scary thing to see. It would be a scary for them, and for you, if someone could do that, wouldn't it?

The Bible tells us that God does see our inner motives and he judges them. So it's not just what's on the outside that makes us corrupt, it's what's on the inside. Jesus talked a lot about that. “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Mt. 12:34) The prophet Jeremiah said, “The heart is deceitful above all things and is beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer.17:23)

John Leith, in his teaching on total depravity in his book *Basic Christian Doctrine*, points out that according to the Bible, one of the greatest sins we have is self-righteousness (p.111).

Self-righteousness is basically the belief that we are not depraved and we don't need a Savior. It is the ultimate form of unbelief. He points out that the only people Jesus **could not and would not help** was those who thought they were not sick, and in no need of a physician (Mt. 9:9-12).

Let not the doctrine of Total Depravity lead you to self-righteousness, but rather point you to the Savior.

### **What Areas of Our Lives Does it Affect? And To What Degree?**

The other thing that we mean by the word “total” in total depravity is that sin affects every facet of our lives.

There is not one part of us that is not affected by our inherent, sinful nature. Our minds have been corrupted by the power of sin; our emotions, our wills, and our intellects. Our home lives, our business lives, our sex lives, our family lives, and our marriage lives, or any other human category that you can think of. It is all been touched by the sinful nature that resides within each person. So it is **total**.

This point warrants a word about what “total depravity” is not.

“Total depravity” does not mean that we are as bad as we could be. The word “total” is not referring to utter, total corruption, but only to the fact that **all** people **are** depraved, and that **all** facets of people's lives have been touched by depravity.

God, in his mercy and grace, has spared us from utter, total corruption. In other words, every human being could be worse off than he actually is.

Even the most corrupt person could have always committed one more atrocity, stolen one more thing, told one more lie, broken one more law, harmed one more person with hurtful words, or

committed one more act of adultery, were it not for the restraining grace of God in his life. To quote Ben Lacy Rose's sermon on Total Depravity, "Even Adolph Hitler loved little children." (p. 3)

What I am describing here is often referred to as God's common grace. Calvin believed that because man was created in the image of God, and that because that image was not totally defamed when Adam sinned, man still had the capacity to do some good and make some significant achievements in his life, in spite of his sinful nature. That's why Calvin had such a deep appreciation for human achievements in science, medicine, literature, art, and other disciplines. (Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p. 213)

So let us stop for a moment and consider what we have learned thus far. First, Total Depravity chiefly refers to the inherent, sinful **condition** that resides in the heart of every human being. Second, it is total in that it affects all people. Third, it is total in that it affects every area of our lives.

Now we come to the kicker in this doctrine. This is the part that can be difficult for us to swallow because of what it says, by default, about those who have not put their trust in Christ, and because of the humility it requires for one to accept it.

### **The Kicker- Our Capacity to Choose God Has Been Destroyed**

The doctrine of total depravity declares that our sinful nature has totally destroyed our capacity to choose God of our own accord. (By saying "to choose God" I mean to love and serve God in a way that is in accordance with God's will.)

Calvin and Luther, and many other Reformers, spoke of this incapacity to choose God as the "bondage of the will."

In other words, when it comes to choosing God our wills can not choose him because our wills are self-centered, not God-centered. Remember, this is the inherent condition that we are all born with. We are born with a sinful, self-centered nature.

To quote John Leith on the matter, "The will is not free to choose what it is not. The will is under the necessity of being what it is. A person's will is enslaved to itself. The self-centered self can not become God-centered by trying hard."

It is not as if our wills are being coerced by God to not choose God. Our wills are not that strong that God would need to step in to prevent us from choosing him! No, that is giving our wills far too much credit. To the contrary, our wills, because of our sin, have been weakened and damaged so much that it can't choose God. We don't need God's help in order to not choose him! But we need a whole lot more than God's help (we need irresistible grace) in order to do the opposite!

No analogy is perfect but perhaps this one will help to make the point. Someone who is addicted to smoking, generally speaking, can not quit on his own. The smoker needs some type of outside

help in order to get off the cigarettes. Trying hard will not get it. He will fail in trying hard. He needs a doctor, patch or some type of treatment, in order to wean him off his addiction and redirect his will.

It's the same with sin. We need God's intervention because the Bible says that we are "dead in our trespasses and sins." (Eph. 2:1) Dead people can't choose Christ!

Jesus **first** told Nicodemus that he needed to be "born again" by the Spirit of God before he ever said anything about "For God so loved the world" and him "believing in Jesus" because Nicodemus could never believe in Jesus unless God first brought back to life, or re-birthed his dead spirit.

So this is how total depravity gets us back to the subject of predestination. If total depravity is true and "dead means dead," and we really are **dead** in our sins, then if God does not intervene to resuscitate our dead lives then we will not choose God. God must first choose us. Predestination is **necessitated** by total depravity.

Now that we have a clear understanding of what this doctrine is let us briefly consider the benefits of this doctrine for our lives.

### **The Practical Benefits of this Doctrine**

First, for starters, it is true.

Look at your own life. Read the newspapers. Turn on the TV. Consider the problems in our world. Are not our lives and the world we live in, stricken by the depravity of man? Reinhold Niebuhr once said that Original Sin is the only doctrine of the Christian faith that is empirically verifiable. In other words, this doctrine can be proven. Man is a sinner and has a sinful nature. All you have to do is open your eyes and see. One would have to be a fool to deny this truth. Knowing the truth is a good thing. Jesus said, "The truth will set you free." (John 8:32)

Second, embracing the doctrine of total depravity keeps us from being blown out of the faith.

We should not be surprised by our own sins, failures, and lapses in our lives. Even as Christians we are still locked in a battle with sin and we will lose some of the battles along the way, though not the war.

Need I go into a long list of people, God's people, in the Bible who, at times, made a mess of their lives? Sometimes, in the words of Paul, we will "do the things we don't want to do and the things we **want** to do we won't!" (Rom. 7:15)

Not only should we **not** be surprised about our own sins, but also the sins of the world. The people who specifically reject Christianity or God in general, often do it because they can't make any sense out of evil. They see some atrocity and they say I can't believe in God because of that terrible thing. How could God let that happen? But Christians should never be shocked because of man's depravity. We are realists and the Bible tells us of the reality of sin in the world.

We should not be shocked by the fact that abortion doctor George Tiller was murdered while ushering in church; nor should we be shocked by the fact that he murdered over 60,000 unborn children during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> trimesters of their mother's pregnancy. 9/11 should not shock us, the holocaust should not shock us, wars, genocides, massive sickness and starvation, or any other problem, should not shock us. Sadden us? Yes. Shock us? No. Total depravity keeps us grounded in reality, thus it aids us in **not** being blown out of our Christian faith.

Third, and I said this earlier in the message, total depravity keeps us humble by pointing us to our need for a Savior.

We really do have a problem, don't we? The world has a problem. Sin is real. It is something we need to be saved from. It is something that we need to be forgiven of. We can not save ourselves, nor can we earn God's forgiveness. Who will rescue us from this body of death? Only the Savior. More on that in the coming weeks.

Amen.