

What is Total Depravity?

Summary: *All of us are accountable to God for our actions and all of our actions must spring forth from faith. For some, faith will lead to abstinence. For others, it will lead to moderation. Regardless of our convictions, let us remember to do all things to the glory of God.*

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 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 2:1-4

“Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it. Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.”¹

“God made man – male and female – in His own image, as the crown of creation, that man might have fellowship with Him. Tempted by Satan, man rebelled against God. Being estranged from his Maker, yet responsible to Him, he became subject to divine wrath, inwardly depraved and apart from a special work of grace, utterly incapable of returning to God. This depravity is radical and pervasive. It extends to his mind, will and affections. Unregenerate man lives under the dominion of sin and Satan. He is at enmity with God, hostile toward God, and hateful of God. Fallen, sinful people, whatever their character or attainments, are lost and without hope apart from salvation in Christ.”²

In the beginning, man was created good (Genesis 1:31). Having taken of the forbidden fruit and eaten of it, he was subjected to

the curse of death, pain, and futility. By one man's transgression, sin and death spread to all men (Romans 5) and man has been henceforth born into a fragmented existence. No longer does he enjoy fellowship with his Maker or the rest of creation. Man experienced division from His Creator, his spouse, himself, his fellow man, and the creation over which he was to work.³ This curse spread through men by nature and not merely through an environmental influence, as all were and are born into sin.⁴ We are all stillborns, utterly devoid of spiritual good.⁵

The doctrine of total depravity is a statement of Biblical revelation on the corrupt nature of all fallen men and women. We are born into a realm of enslavement to self, sin and Satan, wholly unable or unwilling to respond positively to our Maker. In the end, no one seeks for God, all are perverse.

In What Ways are we Corrupted and Depraved?

1. We have darkened minds

- *because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so*
Romans 8:7
- *But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.*
1 Corinthians 2:14
- *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 2:3
- *So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them...*
Ephesians 4:17-18b
- *And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds...*
Colossians 1:21

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith

² From The Village Church Statement of Faith

³ All of these elements can be seen in the curse pronounced in Genesis 3.

⁴ This is most clearly referenced in Romans 5 in which Paul argues that in Adam all participated in his sin and were justly subjected to his curse.

⁵ This does not mean that man can do no social good, but rather it is a recognition that even our righteous works are as rags in God's sight. As Romans 14:23 tells us, whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

2. We have darkened hearts

- *For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.*

Romans 1:21

- *...because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.*

Ephesians 4:18c-19

3. We are enslaved to sin

- *Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin."*

John 8:34

- *For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another*

Titus 3:3

4. We abide under futility

• **Ecclesiastes**

- *knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers*

1 Peter 1:18

5. We are already dead

- *And you were dead in your trespasses and sins...even when we were dead in our transgressions...*

Ephesians 2:1,5a

- *When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions...*

Colossians 2:13

As can be seen from the above overview of the effects of sin upon man, he is surely in a most deplorable condition. His heart and mind are darkened, he is a slave to sin and Satan, his

existence is futile and even his life is death. He is able to merit nothing whatsoever but wrath of God.

What About God's Commands?

- *If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*

Joshua 24:15

- *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*

Matthew 6:33

Some would read the description of depravity above and in some manner disagree with the contention that none seek God. After all, doesn't Joshua tell us to choose and Matthew tell us to seek? Surely there are a number of other similar Scriptures that say the same. What do we do with those passages?

First, we must understand that a command does not guarantee the ability to meet the conditions of that command. The Lord spoke to Pharaoh and told him to let His people go, but then the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he could not obey God's command.⁶ In addition, Jesus commanded Lazarus to come forth from the grave, but surely this did not indicate that he had the natural ability to do so. He was dead, with no ability whatsoever but to lie in his tomb. In like manner, we are dead in our transgressions and sins (Ephesians 2:1, 5) until He speaks life and gives us the ability and desire to obey.

Second, we must understand the difference between prescriptive and descriptive language. God's commands are said to be prescriptive as He is presenting laws and duties which we are expected to fulfill. On the other hand, narrative is said to be descriptive as it merely describes what did, does or will happen. Passages which tell man to repent and seek God are prescriptive, they prescribe the way of obedience. Passages which speak of man's inability to carry out God's commands are descriptive, they describe the reality of the outcome.

Therefore, both descriptive and prescriptive texts are maintained. We are commanded to seek the Lord, but none of us will follow that command unless God so works that obedience into us.

Pertinent Scriptures

- *The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?*

Jeremiah 17:9

⁶ I know that some would argue that Pharaoh hardened his own heart and that the Lord merely responded to Pharaoh's continued self-hardening, but such a contention is really not preferable. Twice before Moses even goes to Pharaoh, the Lord says that He will harden his heart (Exodus 4:21 and 7:3) and Romans 9:17 makes it clear that God's eternal purpose was always to display His power through Pharaoh's resistance.

- *For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.*

John 3:20-21

- *...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...*

Romans 3.23

- *What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.'*

Romans 3:9-12

- *For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

Romans 8:5-8