

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

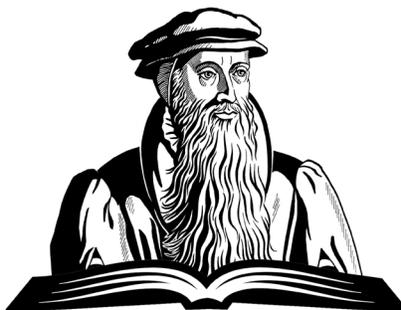
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 3:

ANTHROPOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

Lecture 7

THE DOCTRINE OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY



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Module 3 ~ The Doctrine of Man

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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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Module 3 ~ Lecture 7

The Doctrine of Total Depravity

The word “gospel” means, good news. But how exactly good is the news of the gospel? To understand the amazing message of salvation, you have to first know something about why sinners need salvation. In other words, you need to know the bad news before you can value the good news. Think, for example, of going to the doctor for a regular check up, and the doctor tells you about a new treatment plan that they have developed that has wonderful results in saving people’s lives. You may think, Well that’s interesting. But it will seem rather irrelevant to you. But if you go to the doctor, and they run a battery of tests, and he comes back to you and says, “I’m terribly sorry, but you have a deadly condition, and you’re in serious trouble. However, we have developed a new protocol, and there’s a treatment plan that has been extremely successful, and we have good results in saving people’s lives.” Well, then you would rejoice, and you would think, How wonderful this is—this development is, because you would see the value for yourself. The bad news that the doctor brings actually reinforces the good news that follows. And we could give other illustrations of the same kind of thing. If you’re swimming in the ocean, and all is well, and someone jumps in tries to save you, you might think that it is a bit of a nuisance. But if you’re drowning, and someone jumps in and saves you and rescues you, and actually saves your life, then you’re going to be extremely grateful for it. And so it is with the natural man. There has to be some acquaintance with the bad news to appreciate the good news of the gospel. But the problem with sinful men is that they do not realize that the bad news regarding their spiritual condition is far worse than they think, and the good news of God’s grace is far better than they think. These two things go together. We need to see ourselves as God sees us, and as he describes us in the Bible. Think of a white sheep. If you see it from a distance, and it’s standing on the side of a hill with green pasture, you might look at it and think, Wow, that’s a very white sheep. But if snow falls onto that pasture, and now you’re looking at the sheep against the backdrop of a blanket of snow, it might look rather dirty, it might look not white at all—it might look rather brown or something else. That whiteness exposes the dirtiness of the sheep. Well, the Scriptures teach us that sin affects and disables the whole of the natural man.

This series of lectures in this third module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the Doctrine of Man—what we call Anthropology. And the purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about man. And we’ve been looking at that, both man before the fall, as well as man after the fall, and seeking to understand what we’re to make of who man is. Well, in this lecture, we’ll explore the Doctrine of Total Depravity.

And we’ll begin, first of all, as is our pattern, by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the Doctrine of Total Depravity. And I would direct your attention to

Genesis, chapter 6. You'll remember the context for this—it's the days of Noah prior to the flood, and there has been a lot of change that has unfolded over the intervening years since the time of Adam, and there's been a spiritual degradation. Men have been left to themselves to pursue their own natural lusts and pursuit of pleasure, and wickedness has begun to abound. That's the context for why God comes to Noah, who is a preacher of righteousness, and tells him to prepare an ark, because the Lord is going to come and destroy the world with all of its wickedness. It's in that context that we come to Genesis, chapter 6, verse 5, and there we read these words: "And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Well, there is a great deal that is packed into those few words. Let's think about some of what this entails.

First of all, we see something about the intensity of sin. "The wickedness of man was great"—so notice that word "great." It was substantial—it was something that was extensive—the nature of the intensity of man's sin. But then, secondly, we also see the totality of sin. He says that his wickedness was great, and he speaks of "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart"—every imagination. So it's not just a little sin here, and a little sin there, or hit and miss. But rather, it is influencing everything that is in him—every thought is tainted with sin. Thirdly, we see the inwardness of sin, because it says the "imagination of the thoughts of his heart." So it's not just the outward actions, you know, he's doing bad things, or saying bad things, but the very thoughts of his heart are full of sin. Fourthly, you'll notice that sin is exclusive. He says that it is "only evil." So it's not partially evil, but completely evil. All of his thoughts are tainted with sin, with evil. You also see that, fifthly, sin is habitual. "The imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Notice that word "continually." This was a habitual description of the character of man, the habits of man. And then, sixthly, we see that sin is innate. It speaks about "the wickedness of man," speaking about something not that he's conditioned by, but something that is inborn within him. It's wickedness that characterizes his person.

Well, in thinking about Genesis 6, verse 5, we see that the bad news is really bad for every unconverted sinner. Left unchecked, this rises as a great provocation of the Lord's wrath, not only resulting in temporal judgments—as was the case in the day of Noah in the sending of the flood, but eternal punishment in hell. And this accentuates that sinners desperately need a Savior. The picture of the ark is a picture of Christ, and of people being taken into the ark, and delivered from the wrath of God. So Genesis 6, verse 5 opens up for us the Doctrine of Total Depravity.

But secondly, let's consider some of the doctrinal details regarding total depravity. And I would direct your attention, first of all, to the Westminster Confession of Faith. In chapter 9, paragraph 3, it says this: "Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath 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." Well, that describes the Doctrine of Total Depravity.

Well, how do we define the words "total depravity"? And that word "total" can be a little confusing, so let's see if we can secure some clarity. "Total" does not mean that man is as wicked as he possibly could be—so it does not mean that. Total means that every aspect of man's nature is impacted by sin—the totality of his person. And so, it's descriptive of something that is horizontal, rather than vertical. It affects every aspect of his person. It's not saying that he is as wicked as he possibly could be, as if it wasn't possible for him to be more wicked. Man's corruption is extensive, but not necessarily intensive. The unbeliever is totally, not utterly, depraved. So that should help us in understanding what we mean by total depravity.

The Bible makes clear that every part of man—every faculty of man—is affected by sin. Think with me about what the Scripture says. First of all, with regards to his mind and his understanding—that is depraved, that is affected by sin. Ephesians 4, verses 17 and 18, say, “This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk”—okay, Paul, how do these other Gentiles walk? How do the unconverted walk? He says, “in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.” So you can see that sin and the depravity of man influences his mind and his understanding.

Secondly, it also influences what they love—what men are attracted to, what excites them, the things that they desire. In 1 John 2, verses 15 and 16, we’re told, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” Love of the world, love of the Father are opposites. It goes on, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” And so, the natural man loves what is sinful—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and so on.

It also influences—his depravity influences his conscience. His conscience is that vice-regent, if you will, within the soul that testifies against him. We learned about that in a previous lecture. In Titus 1, verse 15, we’re told, “Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled.” Depravity results in a defiled conscience.

Next, we see that man’s will is also depraved—so his volition—what he does, and how he uses his will, the things that he pursues, and so on. Jesus says, in John 8, verses 43 and 44, “Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word. Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do.” So here’s the will—what men will do. They will do the lusts of their father, the devil. The will is also depraved.

Well, next, this depravity, which influences all of the various faculties of man results in the total inability of the natural man to do what is pleasing to the Lord. So total depravity needs to be associated with his total inability to do what pleases the Lord. We saw reference to this in a previous lecture on the Freedom of the Will. You’ll remember, in Romans 3, there are none that are righteous, no not one; there are none that seek after God, there are none that do good.

The Scripture provides some graphic descriptions of this total inability. So let’s think about man’s total inability. How is it described in the Bible? First of all, man is described as a slave to sin. So it’s not as if he can take sin and, perhaps, leave sin, that he can decide at times to serve sin, and otherwise. No, he’s a slave—he’s captive, he’s under the power of sin, he’s controlled by sin. Again, John, chapter 8, verse 34, “Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin,” or, the slave of sin. So they’re in slavery to sin.

Secondly, in terms of his inability, man is described as being spiritually dead. So man is not just sick, not just weak, not just crippled—he’s actually spiritually dead. Ephesians 2, verse 1, speaking of a Christian, he says, “And you hath he quickened, who were”—now he’s referred to before they were converted—“who were dead in trespasses and sins.” So they’re spiritually dead. They may have physical life—they can see, and hear, and walk, and run, and eat, and so on, but their soul is dead to the things of God—they can’t see the truth, or hear the truth, or respond in love to the truth, or do the truth. The same thing is reinforced in that same chapter, Ephesians 2, verse 5. So they’re spiritually dead.

The third characteristic of man’s inability is that he is blind. Ephesians 4, verse 18: “Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in

them.” It’s not just that his sight is dim, needing something equivalent to glasses, like I’m wearing, but rather, he cannot see at all. He can’t see the truth at all, he’s unable to see what is spiritually pleasing to the Lord. And so, you’re beginning to get a picture here of man’s inability. What can dead men do? They can’t do anything. What can blind men see? They can’t see anything.

Well, fourthly, that brings us to the fact that man’s total inability is described in terms of him being powerless. He’s powerless, he has no strength—no strength to do what he ought to do. Jesus says, in John 6, verse 44, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.” You’ll see something similar in 1 Corinthians 4, verse 7, what do we have that we haven’t received; or John 15, verse 5, that without Christ, we can do nothing. Man is powerless to do what is pleasing to the Lord.

Next, we also see his inability, in terms of ignorance—his ignorance of the truth. First Corinthians 2, verse 14, “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” He can’t know them; he’s ignorant of them.

And so, all of this is descriptive of man’s inability, which is part of his total depravity. Natural man is not free, he is not just sick, he’s not dim-sighted, he’s not just weak, he’s not somewhat knowledgeable. No, he’s the opposite of all of those things. And this total depravity and total inability is as universal as sin itself, which means every individual is totally depraved—everyone born into this world, and apart from the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Go back and consult again, Romans 3, verse 10 and following. So this helps us kind of flesh out our understanding of the doctrinal truths regarding total depravity.

But then, thirdly, we should consider this polemically—we have to consider some of the errors that are related to Total Depravity. And the first thing that is sometimes raised is this: people will hear this doctrine, and they’ll say, “Well, not all men appear equally wicked.” We’re saying that all men are totally depraved, but they don’t appear equally wicked. There are some notorious criminals, and there are other people that are rather quiet and do what seems like insignificant acts of wickedness, and so on. Well, it can be helpful here if we distinguish theologically between the sinfulness of sin, and the degrees of the heinousness of sin. So the sinfulness of sin—this is something speaking about the nature of sin itself, and it is the same with every sin and every person. But that is different from describing the degrees of heinousness of sin. Some sins are more heinous, some sins are less heinous. So take any one of the Ten Commandments—take the sixth commandment, for example. And we know that Jesus says in Matthew 5, that if you hate your brother, if you speak evil against them, you are guilty of murdering them in your heart. But to think something bitter or angry about a person is less heinous than actually expressing it—saying it to them. And saying it to them is less heinous than, perhaps, physically acting out and maybe striking them. But striking them would be even less heinous than actually murdering them. So in each of these cases, the sinfulness of sin is the same, they’re equally sinful before the Lord, but the degrees of heinousness are different. And so, when people say, “Well not all men appear equally wicked,” they may be saying, some show greater heinousness in the sins that they’re committing, but that doesn’t affect the Doctrine of Total Depravity, which is talking about man’s sin and inability before the Lord. They’re all equally in that condition of sinful depravity at root, and at the bottom.

Secondly, another objection that is raised is this: What about the so-called good works in sinful men. A person helps an old lady cross the street, or they give food to somebody who’s hungry, or they say a nice word to someone by way of encouragement. “You’d say, Well, see, there’s some good—there’s some good in them.” Well, that’s what theologians sometimes call “civic good.”

And civic good appears good, but it is just bridling perversity without removing it from the heart. Even these actions of civic good are counted as sin, when viewed in relationship to God. So the unconverted person who is engaging in what we'd say is civic good, is still considered sinful when viewed in the relationship to God, because it is done with impure motives, and not for God's glory. So they may help an old lady cross the street, but it may be because it makes them feel better, or it gives them a sense of their own goodness before other people, or they may have a whole wide array of different motives. But for the unbeliever, they're not doing it for God's glory, and therefore, even their civic good, those actions, are still sinful. This is why the prophet Isaiah can say, "Your righteousnesses are as filthy rags"—that before God, in terms of acceptance before him, in terms of access to him, and in terms of reconciliation to the Lord, all of these so-called good deeds are as filthy rags before the Lord.

Thirdly, people will object, "If it is true that man has a total inability, if he is not able to do what is good, then he should not be responsible for doing good either. If he's not able, then he's not responsible." This is a common objection. But the Bible teaches that he remains responsible. Why? Think back to our previous lectures. Man always chooses what he wants. He always chooses what he wants, but he only wants what is ultimately displeasing to God. His inability never removes his responsibility before the Lord. He's still culpable for what he does, before the Lord.

Well, fourthly, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves. And first of all, it's helpful here to see why it is important that ministers of the gospel preach both law and gospel. We have to preach both law and gospel. There is a place within the design of God in his Word for preaching in a way that produces what we call a "law-work," exposing people to the reality of their sin. Remember, they naturally do not realize that the bad news is as bad as it really is, and can't therefore appreciate how good the good news is. Paul says this in Romans 3, verses 19 and 20, "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. 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." So, in preaching the law of God, we are showing people the bad news. We're bringing them to see—with the blessing and ministry of the Holy Spirit—we're bringing them to see and to have a knowledge of their own sin, of their need, of their depravity, of their lostness before the Lord. And so, it would be a fault in ministers, if they only preached the good news without telling the sinner the bad news that makes the good news relevant. And this is really working in connection with how the Spirit works. The Spirit comes to convict the world of sin and of righteousness and judgment to come. And then the Spirit takes the things of Christ and shows them to a person. The Spirit gives them faith to receive Christ as he is offered in the gospel, and so on. So the need for both preaching law and gospel.

Secondly, we see the inescapable necessity of the sovereign grace of God, and the Holy Spirit's ministry. If you go back to that passage in Ephesians 2, in those first three verses, it opens up, and it says the natural man is "dead" in sin. And then it goes on to say that natural men are "children of disobedience"—those who are transgressing God's Word and his law. And then it goes on to say, in verse 3, that they are "children of wrath." So they're dead, and they're disobedient, and they're damned. Then it goes on, in verses 4 and 5, and it says, "But God"—"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved)." We see the inescapable necessity of the sovereign grace of God. The ministry of the Holy Spirit here accentuates the wonder and beauty and glory of the gospel. It shows us that it is truly amazing grace! The Holy Spirit's work to come to those who

are lost in themselves, and to bring them by his power to the Lord Jesus Christ—God drawing sinners who could never run themselves to God. It shows how amazing his grace is—his grace—he comes and intervenes! He comes and breaks into the world of the sinner. And God draws them—and he sends his Spirit to work in them, and by his grace, he redeems them. And we're left saying, "This is amazing!"—the glory of the good news of the gospel.

Thirdly, we see that the way up is the way down. So the bad news comes before the good news. If we were only teaching the bad news all the time, that would be a tragedy. And if we were only telling people, who had no sense of their need, of the good news, that would be mistaken as well. But these two have to be held together. And this puts the emphasis, as we've noted, on God's amazing grace. Because now, when we're brought to see the reality of our true condition as totally depraved before the Lord, and we're brought to see the wonderful provision in Christ's redeeming work, his atonement upon the cross, his sacrifice for sin, the cleansing of his blood, his righteousness credited to the account of those who believe upon him, and so on, this results in profound joy; it results in profound comfort and blessing. The Christian is able to wake up every morning, and whatever other burdens and difficulties they're facing, they're able to say, "Every day that is a day outside of hell is a wonderful day." To wake up and to realize that we are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, and that we've been brought into the glorious riches of his grace gives the Christian a sustained joy, and a comfort that cannot be taken away from them. And so this is wonderful.

Fourthly, and most importantly, this doctrine, the Doctrine of Total Depravity—total inability, requires that all the glory and honor go to God, and not to man. Man can't take credit. Man can't point to himself. In the Bible, and in these Biblical doctrines, God is lift up high in all of his glory, and man is put down into the dust. And we see that all grace comes from God, and therefore, all of the glory must go to God. Man can't take credit—the believer cannot take credit for anything in himself. There is nothing that he has not received by way of grace and goodness. All of the glory goes to God. You can see how this doctrine magnifies the glory of God, and it exalts him in all of his beauty, and in all of his power, and it teaches the believer to worship him, and to adore him.

Well, in this lecture, we have explored the Doctrine of Total Depravity. Really, over the last several lectures, we've considered the impact of the fall of mankind, and what the Bible teaches about man in his sinful condition. Beginning in the next lecture, we will turn our attention to the Doctrine of the Covenant, and we will first explore God's initial covenant with Adam in the Garden of Eden—what we call, the Covenant of Works.