

God's Portrait of Depraved Humanity (Romans 3:13-17)

Introduction: Please open your Bible to Romans 3:9-18.

The story is told of a man who was walking through a park one Saturday afternoon. As he was walking a group of young people asked if he would take their picture. To their great surprise the man responded by saying, "I already have it." When the group of young people asked him where and when he had taken their picture, he pulled out his Bible and he read **Romans 3:9-18** to them. After reading the passage he said to them, "This is your picture."

Dear people, the Bible is not a flattering book. The picture that it paints of us is not only unflattering, it is deeply disturbing. But the portrait that the Bible paints of depraved humanity is completely accurate and undistorted. It is a true and depiction of what sin has done to us.

The Bible's teaching on human sin is often referred to by theologians as **total depravity**. The word "total" in total depravity does not mean that each sinner is as bad as he/she could possibly be. That would be **utter depravity**. Instead the word "total" means that the totality of man's being has been affected by sin. It's not partial depravity but total depravity because every part of us is corrupted by sin (i.e. the body, the mind, the heart, the desires, the affections, the emotions, the conscience, and the will). This is what you could call **holistic depravity**.

Other terms used to describe man's sinful condition are radical depravity, pervasive depravity, total inability, and radical corruption. All of these are apt descriptions of our sinful condition.

The doctrine of man's total depravity is one of the **major pillars** of Christian theology. It is pervasively taught in the Word of God.

Steve Lawson, "If someone does not hold to total depravity it is not because they know too much of the Bible, but because they know too little of the Bible."

There are many, many passages that teach total depravity. But the single greatest passage in the Bible on total depravity is the one that is before us this morning in **Romans 3:9-18**.

Review: At this point in our study of **Romans** we are looking at the second major division of the book...

I. The Gospel Introduced (1:1-17).

II. The Gospel Explained (1:18-4:25).

And the way Paul begins to explain the gospel is by explaining our need for the gospel. We are calling this...

A. The Need For Righteousness (1:18-3:20).

The one word that summarizes this lengthy portion of **Romans** is the word "condemnation." When you think about **Romans 1:18-3:20** you should think of it in terms of a **courtroom**. The Apostle Paul is the **prosecuting attorney** whose aim is to prove beyond any shadow of doubt our condemnation before a holy and just God.

Paul begins with...

1. The condemnation of Gentiles (1:18-32).

From there Paul then turns his attention to the Jews. As a master of logic and argumentation, Paul proves...

2. The condemnation of Jews (2:1-3:8).

After proving the condemnation of both the Gentiles and the Jews, Paul then turns his attention to the whole world...

3. The condemnation of all (3:9-20).

In this section of **Romans**, all of humanity is put on trial. And as Paul puts all of humanity on trial, he does not have one **positive or nice** thing to say. This section is **entirely negative**.

Now, as we noted last time, this critical portion of **Romans** has a definite **structure** to it. I have outlined it using legal terminology. Paul begins with...

- a. The charge stated (v. 9).
- b. The evidence presented (vv. 10-18).
- c. The verdict rendered (vv. 19-20).

Last time we looked at...

I. The Universal Reign of Sin (3:9-12).

The great emphasis in this part of the text is on **the universality of sin**. The key phrase is found in v. 9, “all under sin.” To be “under” something is to be subject to its power. So to be “under sin” means that we are under the power of sin. This fallen world is **the domain of sin**.

Sin is **like a king** and all people are born citizens of the kingdom of sin. All people, by nature, are **subjects of King Sin**. Sin has a universal reign over human society. We are all, by nature, under sin. Sin owns you. You are, by nature, under its dominion.

And so Paul’s point in v. 9 is that all people are under sin. Whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, you are, by nature, under the power and subjugation of sin. This is **the formal charge** that Paul brings against the entire human race.

But Paul doesn’t merely state the charge, he proves the charge. And he proves the charge through **the presentation of overwhelming evidence** in vv. 10-18. Another way to think about vv. 10-18 is that these verses are **Paul’s witnesses in the courtroom** (i.e. OT Scripture). And these witnesses prove the charge that all humanity is under the reign of sin.

In vv. 9-12 Paul shows us **how wide** sin goes. Sin extends to all humanity (read the verses).

Then in vv. 13-18 Paul shows us **how deep** sin goes. All of us are sinners in that sin corrupts all of humanity. And all of us are sinners in that sin corrupts every part of us. The corruption of sin within each of us is not superficial. It is pervasive and radical.

Proposition: With the time that we have this morning we will look at vv. 13-17. And what ties these five verses together is that they present **man’s radical depravity in social terms**. In vv. 10-12 we see what sin does to our relationship with God. But in vv. 13-17 we see what sin does

to our relationship with man. It is evident that all people are depraved because our sin is manifested in how we treat other people.

We will call this section...

II. The Radical Depravity of Sin (3:13-18).

In this part of the portrait Paul **paints three details** of fallen man's depraved nature the first two of which we will look at this morning...

A. Our Destructive Speech (vv. 13-14).

B. Our Warlike Ways (vv. 15-17).

Now, before we dive into our text, I want you to observe the many references to the **human anatomy**:

“throat” (v. 13)

“tongues” (v. 13)

“lips” (v. 13)

“mouth” (v. 14)

“feet” (v. 15)

“eyes” (v. 18)

“mouth” (v. 19)

In this portrait of depraved humanity we see that we are sinful from head to foot.

That brings us to...

A. Our Destructive Speech (vv. 13-14).

Of all the references to the human anatomy that Paul uses in this passage, four of them are concentrated on our speech in **vv. 13-14**.

Thomas Schreiner, “The universal dimension of sin is nowhere more evident than in human speech.”

If you want to prove the reality of human sin, the easiest way to do so is by pointing to a person's speech. Nothing outwardly manifests our sin more than our mouth. The Bible gives a very simple yet profound principle: Whatever is in the heart proceeds out of the mouth. A person's mouth is a window into their soul. What is a person like on the inside? All you have to do is listen to their words because words reveal the heart.

Paul begins in **v. 13** with the throat...

v. 13 “Their throat is an open grave.”

In the ancient world in the land of Israel graves were sealed out of respect for the deceased and for the benefit of the living. Graves were sealed to hide the sight of and the stench of a decaying body. To open a grave was to unleash the stench of decay and rot.

When the Bible wants to describe how deeply sinful we are it compares our throat to an open grave. Out of a person's throat comes the stench of a rotting body. That is to say human speech is corrupt and foul. Think of all the foul things that come out of people's mouths: Profanity, obscenity, vulgarity, blasphemy. As sinners we have dirty mouths. When a person opens their

mouth it's like opening a grave and the stench of death comes out. What comes out of man's throat proves his radical depravity.

From there Paul gives a second description of human speech...

"With their tongues they keep deceiving,"

In His wisdom and goodness, God made us to be communicative and expressive creatures. God created us with the amazing ability to develop language skills in writing and in speech. God created us with lungs, a throat, lips, and a tongue all of which are necessary to speak. And God created us to use the gift of speech to glorify Him, to praise His great name, to bless and edify others, and to speak truth. But instead, sin has so corrupted us that we use our tongue to lie and deceive.

We are all born liars (Ps. 58:3). One of the most common sins committed by children is lying. And you don't have to send children to lying school to learn how to lie. They do it naturally. And it doesn't stop when a child grows up. Adults also lie and deceive and oftentimes they become very skilled at lying.

We lie because we are utterly selfish. We lie to protect ourselves. We lie to enhance ourselves. We lie to cover up things which diminish our reputation and we lie to impress others. Lying is almost always rooted in the fear of man. We lie because of fear (to avoid punishment). We lie because of pride (to make people think highly of us). We lie because of greed (to get what we want). We lie because of shame (to hide our guilt from men).

Think of all the ways that people lie:

1. Outright lying (this is when you say something that is flat out false).

E.G. When you **call in sick at work** but you're not sick.

2. Half-truths (this when you only tell part of the truth rather than the whole truth; omission).

E.G. When one of your children says to you that **his brother hit him**. But he conveniently leaves out the part that he hit his brother first.

3. Exaggeration (this is when you tell the truth but you overstate it; embellish the truth).

E.G. I caught a **fish** (true statement) and it was this long (not true).

4. Cheating (this is when you achieve a certain goal by deceit).

E.G. You make an A on a **test** but you cheated.

5. Flattery (this is when you compliment someone to get something from them; disingenuous).

E.G. I love your **hair**. My, what a beautiful outfit you have on today.

6. Hypocrisy (this is when you pretend to be something that you're not; it's being fake; putting on a front; it is misrepresenting yourself).

E.G. This is like the **married couple** who always presents themselves as being the perfect couple but behind the scenes it is an entirely different story.

7. Slander (this is when you misrepresent someone else to damage their reputation).

E.G. **Jesus** was slandered (He was called a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners).

8. Breaking promises (this is when you don't do what you said you would do).

E.G. You say you will **pray** for someone but you don't.

9. Forgery (this is producing something that isn't genuine like writing someone else's signature).

10. Plagiarism (this is using someone's work and claiming that it's yours).

E.G. Taking a **statement from a book** and using it as if you had come up with it.

11. Betraying a confidence (this is when you share information that you weren't supposed to share).

There are a lot of ways to lie.

Alexander Pope, "He who tells a lie is forced to invent twenty more to sustain it."

Sir Walter Scott, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

According to **Prov. 6:17**, one of the things that God hates is "a lying tongue."

Prov. 12:22, "Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD..." cf. 6:12

Charles Spurgeon, "Any crime is possible to a liar. He who is rotten with falsehood will break at the touch of every temptation. It just means that if a person will lie and develops a pattern of lying as a way of life that person will do anything. Someone who becomes good at lying loses his fear of being discovered and will move on to any number of evil actions. He becomes arrogant and self-assured. He comes to truly believe he is above the law. You should fear people like this."

Paul gives a third description in **v. 13**...

"The poison of asps is under their lips."

An "asp" is a poisonous snake. They have venom in their mouth. In the same way, people have venom in their mouth. That is to say our speech can be deadly just like a poisonous snake. The way we talk to other people is like a poisonous snake sinking its fangs into a person's flesh and injecting them with deadly poison. That's what our sinful words are like. With our lips we destroy others. We inject poison into others by our destructive words. Death is in the power of the tongue.

Charles Spurgeon, "The old serpent has not only inoculated us with his venom, but he has caused us to be ourselves producers of the like poison: it lies under our lips, ready for us, and, alas, it is all too freely used when we grow angry, and desire to take vengeance upon any who have caused us vexation. It is sadly wonderful what hard things even good people will say when provoked."

Paul continues in...

v. 14 “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness”

Notice the word “full.” Cursing and bitterness are not rare but common. There’s not just a little bit “of cursing and bitterness” in our mouth. Our mouth “is full of cursing and bitterness.”

“Cursing” is the idea of invoking harm upon someone. It is to wish for and verbally express hostility against another person. “Bitterness” is the idea of a smoldering resentment that gives vent to bitter words.

ILLUSTRATION: Our 20th wedding anniversary trip to NYC. The man rollerblading at Central Park who cursed at us for walking on the wrong part of the sidewalk.

What characterizes depraved humanity is our destructive speech. Marriages are dissolved, children are alienated, friendships are broken, jobs are lost, reputations are destroyed because of our words. Families are fractured and even wars are started because of our words. Sinful man has turned his tongue into a weapon.

Isaiah 6:5, “Then I said, ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.’”

That brings us now to...

B. Our Warlike Ways (vv. 15-17).

v. 15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood.”

Depraved humanity is **violent**. The first human death was a **murder** (Gen. 4; cf. 8:21). Violence is not new. Ever since the fall we have lived in a violent world. Our advancement in technology has done nothing to curb our violent ways. It only has given depraved man more tools to use as weapons. Every single day we hear about murder in the news. Our country is a war zone. There was a shooting yesterday in Buffalo and in Milwaukee the day before. There will be more shootings and murder today in our country.

21st century America has been called a neo-barbarian age. And that is true. Just this past week, liberal Senators sought to codify Roe v. Wade as federal law. You could write **Romans 3:15** on the door of every abortion clinic. We are swift to shed blood.

People kill for revenge. People kill for greed. People kill for jealousy. People kill for fun.

Robert Haldane, “Such is a just description of man’s ferocity, which fills the world with animosities, quarrels and hatred in the private connections of families and neighborhoods; and with revolution, wars and murders among nations. The most savage animals do not destroy so many of their own species to appease their hunger, as man destroys of his fellows; to satiate his ambition, his revenge, or [greed].”

Robert Murray McCheyne, “The seed of every sin known to man is in my heart.”

Do you realize what that means? It means that every one of us is capable of committing murder. The seed of murder is within every heart. Given the right situation and the right pressures every

one of us is capable of doing anything including murder.

Paul continues in...

v. 16 “Destruction and misery are in their paths.”

This week a terrible storm blew through Sioux Falls, SD. I watched a video of drone footage of the aftermath of the storm. The storm left a wake of destruction and misery in its path. That is what people are like. Wherever you find people you find destruction and misery. Sinful man has a great capacity to destroy everything he touches, leaving a trail of pain and suffering in his wake. So much of the suffering in our world is man-made.

Paul continues in...

v. 17 “And the path of peace they have not known.”

Sinful man is warlike and violent. Sinful man is murderous and full of conflict. Sinful man causes destruction and misery. And as a result we live in world without peace. Sinful man knows the path of destruction and misery. And he does not know the path of peace.

I can distinctly remember as a college student when the thought occurred to me for the first time that the entire history of the world can be known by studying **the history of war**. The history of the world is the history of war. Just think of America. Our country is always involved in some kind of war or conflict. We don't have peace with certain countries in the world (North Korea, China, Russia, Iran). We don't have peace between our own political parties. We have blue states and red states.

There is conflict in every part of human society. In the nursery. On the playground. In the government. In the classroom. On the ballfield. In neighborhoods. In the family. In the home. And sometimes even in the church.

Alvin Plantinga, “It [evil; sin] has been abundantly verified in the wars, cruelty, and general hatefulness that have characterized human history from its very inception to the present. Indeed, no century has seen more organized hatred, contempt, and cruelty than the late and unlamented twentieth; and none has seen it on as grand a scale.”

Think of all the things that exist because of sin. Because of sin there are police. Because of sin there are lawyers, and courtrooms, and judges, and jails. Because of sin there are hospitals. Because of sin there are medicines, and nurses, and doctors. Because of sin there are counselors and therapists. Because of sin there are cemeteries. The path of peace we have not known because of sin. We don't have peace with others. And we don't have peace within because we don't have peace with God.

Conclusion: **Oliver Cromwell** was a Puritan political and military leader in 17th century England. He once commissioned an artist to paint an official portrait of himself that would enshrine his appearance for future generations. It was common in such portraits for the artist to enhance the person's appearance. But as the story goes, Cromwell told the artist to paint him “warts and all.”

We don't like pictures of ourselves that are unflattering. But in **Romans 3** we have a picture of

ourselves “warts and all.” This is God’s portrait of depraved humanity.

Many Christian doctrines are not **empirically verifiable**, that is to say they cannot be **proven** through mere **human observation or experiment**. For example, the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation of Jesus, and the Atonement of Jesus are not empirically verifiable. But certain other Christian doctrines are empirically verifiable such as **the depravity of man**.

The British journalist and author **Malcolm Muggeridge** once said, “The depravity of man is at once the most empirically verifiable reality but at the same time the most intellectually resisted fact.”

The depravity of man is obviously true. But we try to explain it away because it offends us. And in so doing we only further prove the fact of our depravity.

The portrait of our depravity in Romans 3 is a very ugly picture. But it is also very encouraging. This portrait of our radical depravity is not the end of the story. The book of **Romans** does not end in **3:17** or in **3:18** or in **3:20**. In just a couple of weeks we will come to **3:21** where Paul begins with the word, “but.”

So yes, **Romans 3:9-18** is an ugly picture. It paints us in a very negative light. We are all under sin. We are not righteous. We do not understand the things of God. We do not seek God. We have turned aside and become useless to God. We do not do good. Our throat is an open grave. With our tongues we lie and deceive. The poison of asps is under our lips. Our mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. We are swift to shed blood. Destruction and misery are in our paths. And the path of peace we have not known.

And yet, God still loves you and me! God knows how bad you are. God knows all of your sins. God knows you better than you know yourself. God knows everything about you. God knows the worst about you. And yet, He still loves you. And He has given His Son Jesus to save you from your sins. May we praise God forever!