

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine biblical anthropology. Dr. Spencer, you said in a previous session that there are three main components to the doctrine of sin: its cause, its nature, and its definition. We have finished discussing the cause and definition, but you said you wanted to return to examine the nature of sin. What more did you want to say?

Dr. Spencer: I want to talk more about the reformed doctrine of total depravity. We already noted that to say man is totally depraved does *not* mean he is as bad as he can possibly be. It simply means that there is no part of his being that is unaffected by sin. So, I noted that the doctrine might more properly be called pervasive depravity, but the term total depravity is so common and has such a long history that we're not going to get away from it.

Marc Roby: And it also goes along with the well-known acrostic TULIP, which is meant to represent reformed theology in a nutshell. The 'T' in TULIP stands for total depravity.

Dr. Spencer: And now that you've brought up TULIP you need to say what the other letters stand for as well.

Marc Roby: All right, the 'U' stands for unconditional election; the 'L' stands for limited atonement; the 'I' stands for irresistible grace; and the 'P' stands for perseverance of the saints.

Dr. Spencer: And, God willing, we will get to all of those doctrines at the proper time. I should also point out that as with total depravity, one can argue that better terms exist for some of the other doctrines as well. But, far more importantly, these five doctrines do not fully define reformed theology. For example, they don't mention the Creator/creature distinction, which is central to reformed theology.

Marc Roby: Yes, in fact, they came about in direct response to the challenge brought by a group of Dutch theologians, called the Remonstrants, in 1610. These theologians were followers of Jacobus Arminius, who died in 1609, and they summarized their disagreements with reformed doctrine in five points. These five points of contention were formally answered by the Canons of Dort and it is those five points that are summarized by that acronym TULIP.

Dr. Spencer: And all five of these points logically fit together, beginning with the T standing for total depravity. As I said, this means that there is no aspect of our being that is unaffected by sin. Our thinking, our emotions, our will, they are all affected. But the most important aspect with regard to our salvation is our will.

Marc Roby: Now, why do you say that?

Dr. Spencer: Because the fundamental issue that has caused, and continues to cause, divisions in the church is the issue of how we can be saved. The disagreement is about what, if anything, man contributes to his justification. And we need to be careful now to be precise with our language.

By justification we are referring to God's verdict concerning man. In Psalm 130:3 the psalmist asks the rhetorical question, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?"¹

Marc Roby: And the obvious answer is, no one. As the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 3:9-12, "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'"

Dr. Spencer: That is our great problem. Because we inherit a sinful nature from our parents, we all sin. We are all rebellious. No one seeks God on his own. We are all guilty sinners. Any human being who stands before God to be judged on his own merits is doomed to be declared guilty. Paul summarizes this in Verse 20 of Romans 3, where we read, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

But, praise God, Paul goes on in the very next verse, Verse 21, to tell us, "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify."

Marc Roby: What a glorious verse that is! There is a righteousness from God, that is not based on our keeping his law, which has been made known to us and to which the Law and the Prophets, meaning the Old Testament, testifies.

Dr. Spencer: That verse gives us hope. We are guaranteed to be declared guilty if are judged based on our own law keeping. We are not righteous. But there is another righteousness available to us, a righteousness from God, which is not based on our keeping the law.

Marc Roby: The obvious question then becomes, "How do I obtain this righteousness from God?"

Dr. Spencer: That is the obvious question. And, as Paul wrote, the Old Testament testifies to this righteousness. We will see far more later when we discuss salvation in detail that the Old Testament documents a progressive revelation of the truth that God provides a substitute to pay the penalty for us and to provide us with this righteousness from God. For now, it will suffice to provide a very brief summary, which begins by noting that the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament was meant to point God's people to their need for a substitute.

Marc Roby: And, in the New Testament, that ultimate substitute is revealed to be Jesus Christ, who is called the Lamb of God.

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Dr. Spencer: And the righteousness from God that Paul spoke of is, in fact, the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself. God requires perfection for us to come into his presence, and none of us is perfect. Jesus told us, in Matthew 5:48, to, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Marc Roby: Needing to be perfectly righteous is, to say the least, a serious problem for us.

Dr. Spencer: It is an insurmountable problem for us. But, as Jesus told us in Matthew 19:26, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” And our problem has two components to it. First, we need to have our sins paid for. We are guilty sinners and our guilt must be taken care of. And then, secondly, we need a positive righteousness to be able to come into God’s presence.

And God solves both of these problems in Jesus Christ. He is the perfect sacrifice, who pays for our sins; in other words, takes away our guilt. And then he is also the only perfectly righteous person who has ever lived and if he is our representative before God, we are counted righteous in him.

Marc Roby: In Session 106 we discussed the fact that Adam acted as the representative of the human race. We share in the guilt of his sin, and our being born with a sinful nature is part of our sharing in the punishment for his sin. But as you pointed out then, God’s using a representative is a great blessing because being represented by Jesus Christ is the only way anyone can be saved.

Dr. Spencer: There is no other way of salvation. And the fact that Christ took our sins upon himself and then gave us his righteousness is called the double transaction or double imputation by theologians. We spoke about this back in Session 73 when we examined the goodness of God. The classic verse to explain it is 2 Corinthians 5:21 where we read that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Marc Roby: Or, as Paul wrote in Romans 5:19, “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that’s wonderful, isn’t it? I don’t think we can ever meditate too much on all that God has done for us. But God is holy and just, the supreme Judge of the universe, and as such he cannot simply wink at our sin. It must be paid for. Paul also wrote in Romans 3:25-26 that “God presented him [referring to Jesus Christ] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, ... so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” In God’s great wisdom his plan preserves his nature as the perfectly just Judge of all and yet also allows him to display his infinite mercy in declaring guilty sinners to be just because we are united to Christ by faith.

Marc Roby: And John Murray correctly called our union with Christ “the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”²

² John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 170

Dr. Spencer: It is the central truth of salvation. Salvation is *in Christ*, which is an expression we see 89 times in the New Testament. For example, in Romans 6:11 Paul wrote, “count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” And in Romans 8:1 he wrote, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”. But we are in danger of straying too far off topic again.

Marc Roby: And when we got into this topic of representation, we were starting to answer the question of how it is a man can obtain the righteousness from God that Paul speaks about in Romans 3:21.

Dr. Spencer: And the answer is that we must be united to Jesus Christ by faith. And with that answer in hand, we can now go back to our discussion of total depravity and see why I said that the fact our will is sinful is our most serious problem with regard to our salvation.

We must be united to Jesus Christ by faith in order to be saved, but because our will is sinful, we have no desire to believe in Jesus Christ and, therefore, will not believe. In fact, in speaking about us prior to our conversion, Paul wrote in Colossians 1:21, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.”

Marc Roby: And an enemy of God has no desire to repent and place his trust in Jesus Christ, which is what it means to believe in him.

Dr. Spencer: That is the crux of the matter. The doctrine of total depravity, which is completely biblical, says that we will never choose to repent and believe in Jesus Christ of our own free will. We have a free will, no one is forcing us to do or think the things we do, but as we have discussed before, our will chooses that which we most desire at any given point in time. And being God’s enemies, we will never choose God.

Marc Roby: Which is why Jesus told us in John 6:44 that “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Dr. Spencer: And as I noted way back in Session 15, the Greek verb used for draw in that verse is ἐλκύω (helkuo), which means to drag, it is not speaking about some kind of gentle persuasion. It is the same word used in Acts 16:9 where we read that Paul and Silas were dragged into the marketplace, and in Acts 21:30 where we read about Paul being dragged from the temple, and again in John 21:11 where we read that Peter dragged a fishing net ashore. I don’t mean to imply that God forces us to believe against our will, he does not. But he must change our hearts first so that we desire to repent and believe.

Marc Roby: And, of course, Paul makes the same point by saying, as he does in Ephesians 2:1, that we were dead in our transgressions and sins before coming to faith.

Dr. Spencer: And, as we discussed in Session 104, by saying that we were dead Paul clearly does not mean that we had ceased to exist, or even that we had ceased to live in this world. He means that we were separated from God and his blessings. We were his enemies and incapable of responding to him in faith.

He uses this same imagery in Colossians 2:13 where he tells us, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.”

Marc Roby: Jesus himself used this same metaphor. He said, in John 5:24, that “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”

Dr. Spencer: Which is clearly speaking about spiritual death and spiritual life. If the person had truly been dead in the sense that word is usually used, he could not have heard Jesus’ words. And, if he had remained spiritually dead, he would not have believed. But, the person who has been born again hears and believes and has, therefore crossed over from death to life. Dead men do not believe.

Marc Roby: And it isn’t just Jesus and the apostle Paul who use this language. The apostle John wrote, in 1 John 3:14 that “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.”

Dr. Spencer: And to reinforce the idea that spiritually dead men cannot do anything to save themselves, listen to what Paul says in Romans 8:6-8, “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”

So, the person who has not yet been born again is hostile to God, he not only doesn’t submit to God’s law, but he cannot submit to God’s law. It is an impossibility. And he cannot please God.

Marc Roby: And yet we read in Acts 17:30 that God “commands all people everywhere to repent.” Therefore, it logically follows from Romans 8 that a sinner cannot repent because he cannot submit to God’s law, which means he cannot obey God’s command.

Dr. Spencer: And also take note of what the apostle John wrote in 1 John 3:21-23; “Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.”

Now, going back to the passage in Romans 8 again, if an unbeliever is incapable of obeying God and is incapable of pleasing him, he is also incapable of obeying the command to believe in Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: Yes, that it is very clear. And, in fact, we are told in Hebrews 11:6 that “without faith it is impossible to please God”. Therefore, the Bible is clear that an unbeliever can do nothing to please or obey God. Faith must come first.

Dr. Spencer: And it follows necessarily that saving faith is not something an unbeliever can exercise on his own initiative. Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:3, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” And in Verse 5 he went on to say, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”

Now, dead people don't choose to be born. Dead people do nothing. The teaching of the New Testament is clear on this subject. We must be born again first, then we can repent and believe in Jesus Christ. That is why Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

Marc Roby: Therefore, the biblical view is that man is born dead in transgressions and sins and cannot save himself. He cannot do anything that pleases God because every aspect of his being is tainted by sin, which again is the reformed doctrine of total depravity. God must do a work in us before we can repent and believe in him, and that work is called being born again, or being regenerated.

Dr. Spencer: And that is also what the Old Testament tells us also. In Ezekiel 36:25-27 God is speaking and says, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." God must cleanse us, give us new hearts, and move us or we will continue in our stubborn, sinful ways. We must be born again, which is a work that God alone can do. Only then will we repent and believe. And our faith will unite us to Christ so that our guilt is taken away and we are given his perfect, unimpeachable righteousness.

Marc Roby: There is an obvious question raised by this doctrine of total depravity. If man is utterly incapable of obeying God's command to repent and believe, how then can it be fair for God to condemn an unbeliever for not doing so?

Dr. Spencer: That is the central question that has caused so much division in the church. But I'm going to have to put off answering it until next time because we are out of time.

Marc Roby: Alright, you were saved by the bell. I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, we enjoy hearing from you.