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### **THE TOTAL DEPRAVITY OF HUMAN NATURE**

By John Cheeseman

The truth about the nature of man is a classic example of the need to submit faithfully to the overall teaching of Holy Scripture. False understandings here will lead inevitably to false views about the new birth, the atonement and the whole plan of salvation.

The teaching of Scripture is clear and unequivocal. Man is ‘totally depraved;’ that is to say, the fall of Adam, in which all men participate (1 Cor. 15:21, 22; Rom. 5 v:12-21) extends to all man’s faculties: his heart (Jeremiah 17:9), his mind (Ephes. 4:17, 18), his will (John 5:40), his conscience (Titus 1:15) and every other part of him. The doctrine of ‘total depravity’ is not that every man is as bad as he could possibly be, but that man’s nature is corrupted and disabled in every aspect. So we do not deny that the unregenerate man is capable of doing and willing things which are in themselves good. This is an effect of God’s ‘common grace’ – that is the work of the Holy Spirit in restraining men from sin and in leading them to do good. Such grace is necessary to prevent the world from sinking into a condition as evil as hell itself. Nevertheless, this is not the same as saving grace, and the good which results is despite the sinner’s corrupt nature.

#### **Pleasing God**

These good deeds are not acceptable to God, because they are without the only motive with which God is pleased – love to God and humble faith in Christ (Hebrews 11:6). When the Pharisaical Jews kept every outward commandment of the Law, God was not pleased with them because every act was marred by the sinful enmity of their hearts. Their best deeds were as filthy rags in the sight of our Holy God (Is. 64:6). Article XIII of the Church of England expresses this truth very clearly – ‘Works done before the grace of Christ and the inspiration of His Spirit are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ.’ There is therefore not a single thing that a man can do that will please God, if he has not been born again of the Holy Spirit.

Every man, woman and child born into this world, with the exception of our Lord was and is a slave to sin (John 8:34). In all of his faculties man is chained and imprisoned in the darkness of his sins and in captivity to Satan. We must therefore guard against the common error that man’s will is free. The Bible is totally against such a notion. Man’s will, like every other aspect of his being, is in bondage to sin. Anything that is in bondage evidently cannot be free. Man’s will, being part of a spiritually dead nature, is not free towards God in any sense, but is ‘free’ only to sin. Paul says absolutely, ‘those who are in the flesh cannot please God’ (Rom. 8:8). Neither is man free to turn to Christ for mercy – he cannot of his own volition. The natural man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them’ (1 Cor. 2:14). Salvation therefore is not of man’s will but of God’s mercy (Rom. 9:16). Those who receive Christ are born ‘not of the will of man, but of God’ (John 1:13). Again, the Articles of the Church of England are explicit. ‘The condition of man after the Fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith and calling upon God’ (Article X).

#### **Moral Inability**

At this point an objection is often raised. If it is true that man in his natural state is quite unable to turn to Christ in repentance, why does God command and require all men to do so, and why does He judge them accordingly? Surely a righteous God will only judge a man for what he has the ability to perform. In other words 'I ought' should imply 'I can'. In response to this let me quote from a recent book which touches on this theme:

It is very important for us to stress the moral nature of this inability. It is not the inability of the wheelchair, but the inability of the will. A man confined to a wheelchair by a physical disability is helpless in a different way and is not responsible for his inability to walk or run. But this is a very particular inability and one which leaves a man wilful and responsible in that inability. It is a bondage of the will and as such is a wilful bondage.' (*Chosen for good* pp. 32, 33 Peter Lewis – Kingsway).

As C.H. Spurgeon used to say 'All their cannots are will nots.'

It is worth adding that there is a point in commanding sinners to obey even though they cannot do so. The sinner who realizes his condition may be driven by the Holy Spirit to seek Christ for refuge. It is just as when Christ called 'Lazarus, come forth!' Lazarus was dead in the tomb; he could not obey, yet in that instant he was quickened by the power of God, and he came forth.

## **Condemnation**

Man then is responsible for his sin and because of that he is under the condemnation of God. Even if man offended in only one part of the Law, he would be under the sentence of death, for 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law' (Galatians 3:10). That condemnation which, but for the mercy of God, would be the just deserts of each one of us, is described in Scripture as a place of torment, of everlasting fire, of eternal separation from God (Rev. 14: 10, 11; Matthew 24:51; 25: 41; 25: 46). These are truths about which we hear little today from so-called 'evangelical' pulpits, but the word of God plainly declares them. The plight of man therefore is truly dreadful. Unless he repents of his sins and believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, he is heading straight for hell. God commands and exhorts him to repent, but he cannot and will not do so. He is 'fast bound in sin and nature's night! Yet only as he sees himself shut in between the condemning finger of the Law, which shows him to be a miserable sinner, and the command of God to flee from his sin and lay hold of Christ, which he cannot obey, does he see his true condition, and consequently, the direction from which deliverance must come. This will be the subject of the following articles in this series.

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