

Human Nature

Introduction. Isaiah 55:9-11 teaches some important principles regarding the efficacy of God's word. The Lord declares it "shall not return to Me void," it "shall accomplish what I please," and "shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it." This reminds me of the phrase parents sometimes use with their children: "I'm not just talking to hear myself talk!" The Lord declares through Isaiah that His word has purpose, meaning, power, and effect.

My assignment in this lecture is to address the subject of human nature. I want to approach that by considering this question: *What do the words of God indicate about the bounds of human nature?* In this study I intend to demonstrate that if God's word is effectual:

- Man's nature is not depraved,
- We have the ability to obey Him, and
- Christ shared our nature.

I. Why Is This an Issue?

- A. The rise of false doctrine on human nature.
 1. Augustine: "Man's nature, indeed, was created at first faultless and without any sin; but that nature of man in which everyone is born from Adam, now wants the Physician, because it is not sound" (Augustine, *A Treatise on Nature and Grace against Pelagius*, 3).
 2. John Calvin: ". . . Free will does not enable any man to perform good works, unless he is assisted by grace; indeed, the special grace which the elect alone receive through regeneration" (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 2, 2.6).
 3. *Westminster Confession of Faith*: "From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 6.4).
"This corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be through Christ pardoned and mortified, yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin" (ibid., 6.5).
- B. These false views assert that:
 1. Adam's sin changed human nature. It is now corrupt and inclined toward sin.
 2. We can't obey without empowering grace. Only the direct operation of the Holy Spirit enables us to do what is good.
 3. This grace does not change human nature. Even if one is chosen by God and saved, he retains a depraved nature that continues to sin.
 4. Christ shared man's original nature, not his corrupt inherited nature.
- C. If we are not careful, we can embrace elements of these false doctrines in the wording we use, the concepts we adopt, and the things we teach.

II. What Does the Bible Say?

- A. The Earliest Accounts.
 1. Following their sin, far from describing a corruption of nature, the inspired record speaks of the man and woman being "like one of Us" (Gen. 3:23).
 2. In the Lord's communication with Cain, no indication is given that a depraved nature could be responsible for sin. In fact, the Lord tells Cain "If you do well, you will be accepted" (Gen. 4:6-7). The Lord urges him to "rule" over sin. This would not be possible if his nature was depraved.
 3. In the account of the Lord's appraisal of the world before the flood He is said to be grieved over the "wickedness" of the world and the presence of their "intent" to sin (Gen. 6:5-8).
 - a. This is meaningless if man's nature is depraved—they could have no other intent.
 - b. God's grief would be His own fault for failing to empower them with grace.

- c. Noah “found grace” because of his righteousness, not as empowerment to do righteousness (Ezek. 14:14, 20; Heb. 11:7; 2 Pet. 2:5).
- B. These accounts show us:
 - 1. Sin corrupted man’s relationship with God, not his nature.
 - 2. Man had the ability to do good.
 - 3. God felt sorrow over man’s intent, but extended grace to Noah because of his obedience.
 - a. Noah did not earn his salvation by his righteousness.
 - b. He was saved by God’s grace, but God extended grace to him because Noah was obedient when the world around him was disobedient.
 - c. Neither Noah nor those lost in the flood are said to have possessed a depraved nature.

III. The Word of God.

- A. Admonitions to obey.
 - 1. In urging the Israelites to obey the law God had given them, Moses declares that it is not “far” from them, but “near you” that “you may do it” (Deut. 30:11-14).
 - a. Paul uses this same wording in Romans 10:4-8 to contrast righteousness by law versus righteousness by faith. He says, “the word of faith which we preach” (i.e., the gospel) is “near you.”
 - b. This shows that both Mosaic Law and the gospel are within man’s ability to perform what is commanded. No additional empowering grace is needed—the revelation of God’s word is a demonstration of God’s grace (Titus 2:11-12).
 - 2. On the same occasion, Moses describes this call to obedience as a choice between life and death, urging them to “choose life” (Deut. 30:19-20).
 - a. If man’s nature is depraved, he has no choice—it is all God’s choice and this call would be meaningless.
 - 3. Near the end of Joshua’s leadership, he calls Israel to fear the Lord, and serve Him; declaring his household’s choice to obey the Lord. This sets an example to the people to choose for themselves to obey the Lord (Josh. 24:14-15).
 - a. Did they really have a choice? If their nature was depraved, they could not choose.
 - b. Only if choice was truly possible do these inspired words have meaning.
 - 4. Admonition to two kings:
 - a. Solomon (1 Chron. 28:8-10). Solomon had the choice to remain faithful and be blessed.
 - i. He did not, even though blessed with wisdom, wealth, and divine inspiration.
 - ii. Was God’s empowering grace insufficient to keep him faithful? No—Solomon had a choice. He didn’t have a depraved nature but the freewill to obey or disobey.
 - b. Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:33-39). Jeroboam, an icon of wickedness, had the choice to remain faithful and be blessed.
 - i. He did not, even though given promises similar to Solomon.
 - ii. Was this because God’s didn’t give him empowering grace? God’s grace gave him ten tribes and the hope of a legacy! Jeroboam had a choice. He didn’t have a depraved nature but the freewill to obey or disobey.
 - c. “Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezek. 18:30-32). It’s not God’s fault, it’s man’s choice.
- B. These texts show us that:
 - 1. God’s law can be obeyed.
 - 2. Man can choose to obey.
 - 3. We can fear, serve, and choose to obey or disobey.
 - 4. It is God’s desire for us to show our willing reverence and obedience.
- C. If these things are not true what does it say about the efficacy of God’s word? It tells us. . .
 - 1. God’s word is meaningless.
 - 2. It serves no purpose.

3. It has no power.
 4. It cannot produce the effect for which it was spoken.
- D. Is God “just talking to hear Himself talk”?
1. NO! He is not!

IV. Christ’s Nature

- A. Evidence from Scripture.
1. Jesus was descended from Adam: “the son of Adam” (Luke 3:23-38).
 - a. If descendants of Adam inherit a depraved nature, Jesus inherited a depraved nature. That would disqualify Him as a “lamb without blemish” (1 Pet. 1:19).
 - b. Clearly, He did not (Heb. 4:15). The doctrine of inherited total depravity is false.
 2. In beginning to address his concern for the Jews’ rejection of Jesus, he speaks of Jesus having come from the fathers “according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:5).
 - a. If having “flesh” gives one a depraved nature, Jesus would have had a depraved nature.
 - b. He did not. Inherited depravity is a false doctrine.
 3. The Hebrew writer speaks of Jesus having “partaken of flesh and blood,” made like His brethren “in all things,” having “shared in the same” (Heb. 2:14-17). This qualified Him to be our propitiation.
 - a. If Adam’s descendants inherited a corrupted nature, but Jesus only shared a nature possessed by Adam before sin, He would not share “in the same” nature as His “brethren.”
 - b. That shows us that man’s nature was not corrupted, since Jesus shared in it.
 4. Certainly, Jesus possessed two natures: (1) Human and (2) Divine (Col. 2:9, but Scripture nowhere teaches that man has possessed two natures: original and depraved).
 - a. Paul says Jesus came in the “likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom. 8:3). If this describes flesh that is sinful by nature, Jesus shared our “sinful flesh.”
 - b. Paul is speaking of Christ possessing the same flesh that men use to carry out sin. Jesus looked like us but did not use the flesh as man does—thus He was in our “likeness.”
- B. These passages make it clear:
1. Sons of Adam don’t inherit sin. Jesus did not and we do not.
 2. The flesh is not sinful by nature. Jesus shared our flesh, but flesh is not sinful by nature. Men choose to use it to sin. Christ did not.
 3. Sharing our nature qualified Jesus as our propitiation (Heb. 4:14-16). If He did not actually share our nature He would not have been qualified as our High Priest, Advocate, or propitiation.

V. Why Do We Sin?

- A. Paul teaches that “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23). If we do not have a depraved nature, why is it that “all have sinned”?
1. Jesus gives us the answer: no, the flesh is not depraved, but the “flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41).
 - a. Paul will echo this, as we shall explore later (Rom. 8:3-4).
 - b. Weakness concerns potential, not necessity; ability, not an unavoidable inclination.
 2. James identifies the source of sin (Jas. 1:12-15). If there was any text in Scripture that we would expect to articulate it if a depraved nature is the cause of sin, it would be this one, but it does not.
 - a. James says desire gives birth to sin.
 - b. It is not God’s fault for tempting us, or for failing to offer us empowering grace. It is our own choice to yield to desire.
 - i. Does that mean desire is a reflection of depravity? No, Jesus had desires (Luke 22:15).

- ii. All natural desires have a lawful outlet—the problem is the pursuit of “ungodly lusts” (Jude 18), “fleshly lusts” (1 Pet. 2:11), and “foolish and harmful lusts” (1 Tim. 6:9).
 - c. Our nature is not depraved, but we are a bundle of appetites that must be properly channeled in obedience to the will of God.
- B. Law brings knowledge of sin, triggering the potential for sinful desire (Rom. 3:20; 7:7).
 - 1. Weak flesh chooses sin (Rom. 7:8-11).
 - 2. The gospel offers deliverance from the consequences of yielding to sinful desire.

VI. How Does Sin “Dwell” in Us?

- A. Roman 7 is one of the most challenging chapters in considering this issue. Misunderstandings that have arisen from it have featured prominently in arguments that support notions that man has a depraved nature.
 - 1. Particularly as it pertains to Paul’s references to sin “dwelling” within man.
 - 2. What does this mean?
- B. Paul says we are “sold under sin” (Rom. 7:12-14).
 - 1. We should remember the words of Jesus. In John 8:34, He explains that the one who sins is a slave to sin.
 - 2. That addresses action resulting in a condition, not a nature causing an action.
- C. Paul’s teaching on indwelling sin (Rom. 7:15-20).
 - 1. We must remember that this comes in a context in the previous chapter that prohibited engaging in sin (see Rom. 6:1-2, 13-18).
 - 2. If Paul is describing some dualistic continuance of a depraved nature for those who are empowered by God’s grace his prohibitions are meaningless.
 - a. Is God’s empowering grace too weak?
 - b. No, any continuance of sin is by choice, not nature.
 - c. So, the issue is not nature in the first place. Sin dwells in us because we still choose (far too often) to sin.
- D. The gospel—“the law of the Spirit of life” offers deliverance from “this body of death” (Rom. 7:24-8:8). How is this explained?
 - 1. The flesh (far too often) serves the law of sin (Rom. 7:25). This is why he speaks of us as having a “body of death.”
 - 2. Walking in the Spirit delivers from this sin cycle (Rom. 8:1-2).
 - a. As Jesus taught, the flesh is weak (Rom. 8:3-4)—the problem is not with God’s law but with weak flesh.
 - 3. We walk “according to the flesh” or “according to the Spirit”—not by having flesh or the direct operation of the Spirit, but by setting the mind on the things of the flesh or the things of the Spirit (Rom. 8:5-7)
 - a. This is clear because he tells the Romans, “you are not in the flesh” (Rom. 8:8-9).
 - i. If being “in the flesh” is having a depraved nature the Romans would still have it.
 - ii. They are not “in the flesh” because they are no longer choosing to set their minds on “the things of the flesh.”
- E. Paul, in this text, is contrasting the futility of walking in the flesh with the blessings of walking in the Spirit.
 - 1. He is not discussing nature but choice.
 - a. You cannot please God when you choose sin.
 - b. That is the sense in which those who “are in the flesh” are said to be unable to “please God.”
 - c. You can’t please God when you do what displeases Him. When you are doing what pleases Him you cannot displease Him (cf. 1 John 3:9).
 - 2. Sin dwells in us only as we desire it and choose to yield to it.

- a. It does not dwell in us through a depraved nature.
- b. It does not dwell in us as God empowers us with grace to do good while ignoring (and allowing) its continued practice in our lives.
- c. It dwells in us as we continue in the struggle against it relying upon Christ's atonement to redeem us from it (in repentance) when we yield to it.

Conclusion. This is not a new issue. Earlier we cited the deterministic views of Augustine. Let's notice a few interesting statements he made in his discussions with the British theologian Pelagius.

"God. . . does not command impossibilities; but in His command He counsels you both to do what you can for yourself, and to ask His aid in what you cannot do" (Augustine, *A Treatise on Nature and Grace, against Pelagius*, 50).

". . . The just and good God could not possibly have enjoined impossibilities, we are admonished both what to do in easy paths and what to ask for when they are difficult" (ibid., 83).

Notice that he is addressing what was apparently a challenge that had been posed to his views; the charge that God does not "command impossibilities." His response is interesting (in spite of his error on human nature) he feels that this addresses the nature of God's law, and the nature of His aid to those who seek Him. I find that insightful. It calls us to consider. . .

What We Can and Cannot Do

1. We cannot merit our own forgiveness: "it is God who justifies" (Rom. 8:33).
2. We cannot know how to behave from our own knowledge: "it is not in man who walks to direct his own ways" (Jer. 10:23).
3. We can follow what God reveals: "we may hear it and do it" (Deut. 30:11-14).
4. We can understand without direct operation of the Holy Spirit: "when you read, you may understand my knowledge" (Eph. 3:4).
5. We can trust in Christ's aid when we ask: "He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Heb. 2:18).
6. We cannot expect His aid if we do not ask for His aid: "you do not have because you do not ask" (Jas. 4:2).
7. We cannot know all He does to aid us: "The secret things belong to God" (Deut. 29:29); He "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20).
8. We can trust in the power of His word to work mightily within us: it "effectively works in you" (1 Thess. 2:13); "The word of God is living and powerful" (Eph. 3:20).

But, what about our struggle against sin? I think some of these conflicts come from souls who recognize the difficulty of this battle we face in overcoming sin. What can help the addict, the drunkard, or the frustrated, struggling disciple who feels helpless to overcome sin? The answer is not found in embracing false doctrine (in the whole or in part). The answer is found in recognizing the true nature of God's word. It is effectual. Man's nature is not depraved. We have the ability to obey Him. Christ shared our nature, and He overcame sin. His sacrifice is the ultimate way that sin is overcome. His word and care for us, as our High Priest, Advocate, and Propitiation offer us aid. May we seek it and accept it!

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October 2024