

Paul or Peale?

A Study on Romans 3:9-18

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In the world today there are two fundamental philosophies concerning the basic nature of man. The most prominent view is that man is basically good with a spark of divinity within him which can be fanned into something great. This view may take many forms, but it has at its root the basic goodness of man and it is quite popular today. The other philosophy, which is the biblical position, is that all men are basically evil, separated from God because of sin, and in a helpless condition as far as their relationship to God is concerned. This view is not popular today.

The goodness of man is the philosophy of Norman Vincent Peale. He starts from the humanitarian assumption that man is inherently good, but is the result or product of a bad environment. He holds that man, by his own inward resources, can stir the good qualities in himself and rise above his environment. This is the power of positive thinking applied to the nature of man. Peale's philosophy is evident in his statement:

“The art of being yourself at your best is the art of unfolding your personality into the man you want to be. By the grace of God you are what you are. Glory in your selfhood. Accept yourself but go on from there. Champion the right to be yourself. Dare to be different and set your own pattern. Live your own life and follow your own star. Respect yourself. You have the right to be here and you have important work to do. Don't stand in your own shadow. Get your little self out of the way so that your big self can stride forward. Make the most of yourself by fanning the tiny spark of personality within you into the flame of achievement. Create the kind of self you will be happy to live with all your life. Be gentle with yourself. Learn to love yourself, to forgive yourself, for only as we have the right attitude toward ourselves can we have the right attitude toward others” (from “This Week,” San Francisco Chronicle, [date unknown]).

This sounds great, but it is not biblical and it cannot work. Almost all educators today hold that man is basically good.

The philosophy of Paul, and of the Bible as a whole, diametrically opposes the Peale's thinking. Paul begins with the power of negative thinking. He shows what man is really like, that man is a sinner by nature, by imputation, and by acts, that in himself man has no merit to give him a right standing before God. Paul sets forth this philosophy so that man will see what he really is, come to the end of trusting himself for salvation, and entrust himself to the

person of Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of sin. After Paul shows that all are guilty, he presents the positive teaching on salvation, free and gracious, in Jesus Christ.

The basic question men face as they wrestle with Paul's teaching is, "Can it be that Paul is appealing and Peale appalling?" As far as the natural mind is concerned, Paul is appalling and Peale is appealing. But Paul becomes appealing when men admit their sinful condition and turn to the Saviour for forgiveness.

In previous lessons we have seen that the pagan, the moral man, and the religious man are all sinners, condemned before God. In Romans 3:9-18, Paul paints another dark picture of men, showing that they are all totally depraved.

GOD'S CHARGE — Romans 3:9

"What then: are we better than they?" Paul puts himself in the same category with other Jews and asks the question, "Are we Jews better by position than the Gentiles?" The Jews are not better, they are worse because they have been given much light and have spurned it, thus having the greater condemnation.

"No, in no wise: for we have proved [charged] both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin." Paul charges that all men are under sin. He has shown that they are sinners by nature. "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). They are also sinners by acts: "Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others" (Eph. 2:3). All men are in rebellion to God. To be under sin means to be dominated by sin, to be under its power, under its rule, under its empire, under its sway, under its control. The charge is definite, detailed, and final; it leaves not the faintest ray of hope for the sinner apart from the Lord Jesus Christ who alone can forgive sin.

Men may reject the fact that they are sinners by nature and deny that they do acts of sin. You may be one who does this, but what are you going to do with the declaration from God that you are a sinner, lost, undone, and under sin? You may ignore it, but that does not change the facts of the case!

MAN'S CHARACTER — Romans 3:10

“As it is written.” In this section Paul picks out fourteen accusations against man, and quotes the Old Testament to prove his point — he appeals to divine revelation, not human understanding.

Jesus Christ taught the sinfulness of men when he said, “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him” (Luke 11:13)? One cannot be a follower of Christ and deny his teaching on the sinfulness of man!

“There is none righteous, no, not one.” There is not one righteous person on this earth:

“The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God,’ They are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice; There is no one who does good” (Ps. 53:1 NASB).

“Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins” (Eccl. 7:20 NASB).

“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it” (Jer. 17:9 NASB).

“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

No person, in himself, has any righteousness that would commend him to God. Apart from Christ who alone can give spiritual righteousness, man is in a hopeless and helpless condition, unable to save himself.

This is called the doctrine of total depravity. It is total, not partial. Man can do nothing to save himself! This doctrine does not mean that unsaved men cannot do good things, for many unregenerate people reach high levels of morality, but their good works fall short of God's holy requirements for salvation. Total depravity is a very difficult concept for natural men to understand; all men think too highly of themselves. They refuse to acknowledge God's description of men. Even some Christians refuse to acknowledge that men are totally depraved.

Just how unrighteous and corrupt is man? He is completely dead because of sin. “And you were dead in your trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1 NASB). A dead man cannot respond. No man can respond to Jesus Christ unless God works a miracle in him, giving him the ability to believe. But God does this; he makes dead sinners come alive!

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:4-9 NASB).

MAN’S CONDITION — Romans 3:11-12

“There is none that understandeth.” No man in his natural mind can understand God, for the carnal mind is an enemy of God:

“But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14 NASB).

“Because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom 8:7-8 NASB).

Man is devoid of the true knowledge of God.

Unsaved men think they know God and even write books about him, but when their thoughts are compared to Scripture it is clear that they have no spiritual concept of God: “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:3-4 NASB). The gospel is hidden from men because Satan has blinded their minds. Blind men cannot see unless a miracle is performed. God must enact the miracle of regeneration if men are to see the truth of the gospel.

“There is none that seeketh after God.” No fallen man in his natural state has ever sought the holy God of Scripture. While men may seek *a god*, they do not seek *the God*. You may ask, “What about the heathen? Don’t they have religion, and aren’t they seeking God to the best of their ability?” Actually, these religions are an attempt to get away from the one, true God of Scripture.

Banish from your mind the idea that any fallen man has ever had a holy thought, or loved a holy God, in his natural heart. By nature, fallen man does not want God. He will

speak about some kind of god that he can use and bargain with, but he does not want a god to rule his life; he wants a tool to use for himself.

We believe that men are saved by grace. Grace expresses the truth that God himself seeks, convicts, persuades, gives, and finally perfects all those who are saved through Christ. God's sovereign grace goes ahead of, and brings into being, all human response to himself. Men can only be saved by God's grace; all anyone can do is accept the gift of salvation through faith. God takes the initiative and draws a person to Jesus Christ. "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44 NASB). Christianity is supernatural because the total work of salvation is a work of God!

Men who believe in sovereign grace for salvation are often accused of taking verses out of context. The verses we are dealing with are in context. They clearly show that no man in his natural state is seeking out God.

"They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable." Man, through his stubborn rebellion, has become useless and is unable to fulfill his original purpose. He was created to have fellowship with and to glorify God, but he has willingly left God and so cannot fulfill this original purpose. If fellowship is to be restored, God must intervene.

"There is none that doeth good, no not one." As far as God is concerned, no person is practicing good. A woman may think her wash very white until she puts it against the pure white of new fallen snow which makes it look yellow and dingy. All of man's human righteousness looks yellow and dingy next to God's absolute holiness.

MAN'S CONDUCT — Romans 3:13-19

"Their throat is an open sepulcher." Man opens his mouth and what comes out can be compared to the putrifying smell of decaying flesh. The stench is more than God can take.

"And He was saying, 'That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man'" (Mark 7:20-23 NASB).

When you are sick and go to a doctor, the first thing he does is tell you to open your mouth so he can look at your tongue and throat. What comes from man's mouth really tells what man is! He is sick and in desperate need of Christ!

“With their tongues they have used deceit.” Man tries to cover up what he really is by a smooth tongue, and he may deceive men this way, but he cannot hide what he really is from God.

“The poison of asps is under their lips.” Men destroy others by malicious words that come from their lips.

“Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.” Through their cursing and swearing, men simply show that they are sinners who actually hate God.

“Their feet are swift to shed blood.” Men are quick to murder or make war. History is full of men exploiting other men, ruthlessly killing and dominating individuals and nations. Some of this has been done by professing Christians!

“Destruction and misery are in their ways.” History is but the record of one nation conquering another by destruction, looting, and enslaving.

“And the way of peace have they not known.” The harder man seeks for inner peace and political peace, the further he seems to move from it. Natural man cannot know the way of peace because he does not know the Prince of Peace.

The United Nations is a worthy ideal, but it has not been able to produce or preserve peace. It cannot because men are sinners. Frequently, the outcome of U.N. activity is friction, trouble, disturbance, and bloodshed. It is not wrong to work for peace, but this does not mean that it will come in any large measure because the basic nature of man has not changed. Men can find peace with God through Christ, but the world will never know political peace until it serves the King Jesus Christ.

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Natural men do not reverence and fear God. They couldn't care less what God thinks about them; they are actually indifferent to God. Most men will tell you that they believe in a god, but almost all of them act as though God does not exist.

CONCLUSION

Jesus Christ is the Great Physician, and he has diagnosed the case of every person in the world: all are sinners and in a hopeless and helpless condition. But will they accept his remedy? If you only *think* you are sick, you may not call a doctor. But if you *know* you are sick and can call a doctor, you are a fool if you do not! Unless you admit your sinful condition, God will not save you. Jesus said, “They that are whole have no need for the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Mark 2:17).

You may say, “How do I know that Christ will call me to salvation if I do acknowledge my sinfulness and need of salvation through Christ?” Jesus said, “For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). If you have any desire to be saved, it is because Jesus Christ is seeking you. If you will call upon the name of the Lord and trust only on Christ to deliver you from your sins, you will be saved. Christ has promised. “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:13). When you believe, you will see that it was not you who sought and called on Christ, but Christ who sought and called you, and by sovereign grace brought you to salvation. Oh, what provision has been made for us in Christ Jesus!