

ARE YOU A GOOD PERSON? ROMANS 3:9–18

INTRODUCTION

Are you a good person?

Most would answer, “Yes.”

When asked why God should let you into heaven, many people answer with some form of,

“Because I am a good person.”

The answer to that question varies based on whether you **listen to the world or to the Word.**

There are **two contrasting answers.**

What does the world say about the nature man?

How does the world answer whether you are a good person?

Psychologists represent the **voice of the secularised culture** we live in—

“[Erich] Fromm described human nature as intrinsically and naturally good and attributed anything bad—evil—to society, especially when society causes the self to deny its own potential....”¹

¹ Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, Second edition (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; The Paternoster Press, 1994), 4–5.

“[Carl] Rogers believes that at his core man is good, not evil.”²

“No concept is more important to the gurus of modern psychology than self-esteem. According to the self-esteem credo, there are no bad people, only people who think badly of themselves.”³

According to one psychologist, author, and professor, when we have doubts about whether or not we’re good, we should know—

“Really, the truth, the fact, is that you are a good person. (Me, too.)”⁴

He lists five ways to feel like a good person:

1. *Take in the good of feeling cared about.*
2. *Recognise goodness in your acts of thought, word, and deed.*
3. *Sense the goodness at the core of your being.*
4. *See the goodness in others.*
5. *Give over to goodness.*⁵

² Jay Edward Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 84.

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., *MacArthur Pastor’s Library on Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 64.

⁴ <https://rickhanson.com/know-youre-a-good-person/>

⁵ See also: *“Standard psychology texts imply that to be normal is to feel happy and to lead an untroubled good life—until uncontrollable lightning may strike, but this is unlikely. In their essence, life and people are good.”*

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/za/blog/warrior-life/201803/the-nature-man-is-man-nature-good-or-basically-bad>.

RICH YOUNG RULER— Luke 18:18–27 [*TURN*]

If that is what the world says about the nature man,
then what about the Word?

How does the Word of God answer whether you are a good person?

Jeremiah 17:9—

“The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can know it?”

DOCTRINE OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY

“The view that every element of human nature is thoroughly infected with sin.... Total depravity means that every aspect—intellect, mind, reason; emotions, feelings, sentiments; will and volition; motivations and purposing; body—experiences the devastating corruption of sin.”⁶

The totality of man’s depravity is **seen in three ways**—

- i. Affects all mankind
- ii. Affects all that man is
- iii. Affects all that man does

⁶ Gregg R. Allison, “Total Depravity,” in *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 212.

i. Affects all mankind

Every man and woman is conceived and born as a sinner.

Psalm 51:5—

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.

Ecclesiastes 7:20—

Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.

1 John 1:8—

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

ii. Affects all that man is

Sin is total or pervasive in that all components of a person are polluted by sin.

This includes both the material and immaterial aspects of a person—both body and soul.⁷

Ephesians 4:18—

[Unbelievers are] darkened in their mind, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.

⁷ John MacArthur, ed., *Essential Christian Doctrine: A Handbook on Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 257.

Mark 7:21-23—

21 For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries,

22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness.

23 All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”

Titus 1:15—

To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled.

iii. Affects all that man does

Genesis 6:5—

Then Yahweh saw that the evil of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Ephesians 4:17-18—

17 Therefore this I say, and testify in the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind,

18 being darkened in their mind, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.

To be clear, total depravity does not mean that unsaved people always act as badly as possible.

[Total depravity does not mean that the sinner will commit or indulge himself in every form of sin or in the worst sins conceivable.]

Nor does it mean that unsaved people cannot do relative acts of goodness.

Luke 6:33—

And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.

Romans 7:18—

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh....

Complete inability to please God—

Romans 8:7-8—

⁷ The mind set on the flesh is at enmity toward God, for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so,

⁸ and those who are in the flesh are not able to please God.

“Total depravity means that our rebellion against God is total, everything we do in this rebellion is sinful, our inability to submit to God or reform ourselves is total, and we are therefore totally deserving of eternal punishment.”⁸

Total depravity means—

Sinners have no ability to do spiritual good or to work for their own salvation from sin.

They are so completely disinclined to love righteousness, so thoroughly dead in sin, that they are not able to save themselves.⁹

PROPOSITION

As Paul argues, **understanding the nature of man** is essential to **understanding the universal need of the gospel.**

So as we study **Romans 3:9–18**, we’ll see that Paul argues that our **nature as humans is utterly corrupted by sin**—we are totally depraved—and therefore we are **not able to save ourselves.**

As evidence, Paul shows **that sin corrupts our relationship with God** and **our relationships with one another.**

⁸ John Piper, *Five Points* (Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2013).

⁹ John MacArthur F., Jr and Wayne A. Mack, *Introduction to Biblical Counseling: Basic Guide to the Principles and Practice of Counseling*, Electronic ed. (Dallas, TX: Word Pub., 1997), 102.

In short, Paul wants you to understand that **you are not a good person** so that you will **not try to save yourself** but will receive the salvation of God promised in the gospel.

You cannot make yourself right with God—you need God to make your right with Him.

[TEXT]

What then [shall we conclude]? Are we better? Not at all...

Romans 3:1-2—

1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?

2 Great in every respect.

In **Rom. 3:1–8** Paul affirms that God will keep the promises of salvation made to the Jews, but that does not exempt individual Jews from God’s righteous judgment.

The Jews have an advantage in that they have every opportunity to live in a right relationship with God.

The saving promises of God do not exempt the Jews from responsibility for their sin.

Amos 3:2—

“You only have I known among all the families of the earth; Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”

In **verse 9**, Paul affirms that that Jews who reject God in sinful rebellion **cannot claim an advantage in the future judgement.**

They cannot shield themselves from God's wrath by appealing to the covenant and their Jewishness.

for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are ALL under sin

This is how Paul understood his argument in the previous sections.

“**Under sin**” = under sin's power—

Romans 6:16—

Do you not know that when you go on presenting yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?

Sin's power cannot be separated from acts of sin, as Paul shows.

So Paul gives us his **theology of man.**

Argument that the nature of man is utterly corrupted by sin.

Unlike Jews who believed humans could keep the Law.

1. THESIS (10)

Paul quotes a **string of OT texts** to argue that man, by nature, is not good.

In **verses 10–12**, Paul cites **Psalm 14:1-3**—

¹ The wicked fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They act corruptly, they commit abominable deeds; There is no one who does good.

² Yahweh looks down from heaven upon the sons of men To see if there is anyone who has insight, Anyone who seeks after God.

³ They have all turned aside, altogether they have become worthless; There is no one who does good, not even one.

As you can see in **verse 10**, Paul has significantly adapted the text to suit the context of his argument—

Romans 1:17—

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous will live by faith.”

Paul paraphrases the substance of **Psalm 14** in order to clearly link its meaning with the theme of righteousness.

as it is written, “There is none righteous, not even one”

This verse introduces the **whole string of Scripture** references.

We should also recognise that it is Paul's thesis statement.

Structure of the string of Scriptures is noteworthy:

1. Thesis (10)
2. Sin corrupts our relationship with God (11–12)
3. Sin corrupts our relationship with one another (13–17)
 - a. Speech (13–14)
 - b. Society (15–17)
4. Summary (18)

Titus 3:3—

For we ourselves also once were foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another.

The universal need for the gospel is demonstrated by the universality of sin.

ALL—whether Jew or Gentile—lack the righteousness of God.

Man is totally depraved—sin affects all mankind.

2. SIN CORRUPTS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD (11–12)

Verses 10–12 parallel **Romans 1:18–32**.

1:18–25 explains that unrighteousness consists fundamentally in the failure to honour and glorify God as God.

11 **There is none who understands**

The essence of sin is the failure to understand.

Romans 1:21–22—

²¹ **For even though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened.**

²² **Professing to be wise, they became fools**

There is none who seeks for God;

No one seeks God apart from His grace.

12 **All have turned aside**

Romans 1:23, 25—

²³ **and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the likeness of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.**

²⁵ **For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.**

Isaiah 53:6—

All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But Yahweh has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.

together they have become worthless;

Worthless—depraved; useless.

Becoming a liability to society because of moral depravity.

There is none who does good, There is not even one.

Paul argues that man is totally depraved—universality of sin

Paul's first evidence that no one is a good person is that **sin corrupts our relationship with God.**

We do not keep the most important command/ standard of righteousness:

Matthew 22:36-38—

³⁶ **“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”**

³⁷ **And He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”**

³⁸ **This is the great and foremost commandment.**

3. SIN CORRUPTS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH ONE ANOTHER (13–17)

a. You can see this in our speech (13–14)

The universal effect of sin is nowhere more evident than in human speech.

James 3:2-6 [*TURN*]

13 **“Their throat is an open tomb**

Psalm 5:9—

There is nothing reliable in their mouth; Their inward part is destruction itself. Their throat is an open grave [...]

Describes either the inner corruption from which hurtful speech flows or the deadly effects of speech.

With their tongues they keep deceiving,”

Psalm 5:9—

[...] They flatter with their tongue.

Concentrates on the **falseness and flattery** that permeate much of human speech.

Even kind words can hide evil/ malicious motives.

Proverbs 10:11—

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, But the mouth of the wicked covers up violence.

“The poison of asps is under their lips”;

Psalm 140:3—

They sharpen their tongues as a serpent; Poison of an asp is under their lips.

Proverbs 18:21—

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, And those who love it will eat its fruit.

James 3:8—

But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

14 **“Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness”**

Psalm 10:7—

His mouth is full of curses and deceit and oppression; Under his tongue is mischief and wickedness.

“Full”—evil speech is not occasional, but constant.

Ephesians 4:31—

Let all bitterness and anger and wrath and shouting and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

James 3:9-12—

9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God.

10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.

11 Does a fountain pour forth from the same opening fresh and bitter water?

12 Can a fig tree, my brothers, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can saltwater produce fresh.

ILLUSTRATION—

“Sticks and stones...”

Often we do the most damage to those we love through our words—family/ friends.

In the culture—hateful, vile speech online and in the media.

b. You can see this in society (15–17)

15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood

Isaiah 59:7—

Their feet run to evil, And they are quick to shed innocent blood; [...]

Proverbs 1:16—

For their feet run to evil And they hasten to shed blood.

16 **Destruction and misery are in their paths**

Isaiah 59:7—

**[...] Their thoughts are thoughts of wickedness;
Devastation and destruction are in their highways.**

Paul isn't referring to the subjective feeling of misery and unhappiness that sin brings.

His point is that human beings inflict destruction and misery on other people

Cruelty/ malice.

17 **And the path of peace they have not known."**

Isaiah 59:8—

They do not know the way of peace, And there is no justice in their tracks; They have made their paths crooked, Whoever treads on them does not know peace.

Violent and savage hymn behaviour towards one another.

When humans don't have peace with God, they don't have peace with one another.

Romans 1:28-32 **[*TURN*]**

ILLUSTRATION—

Murder and killing

Violence and assault

Paul's **SECOND** evidence that no one is a good person is that **sin corrupts our relationship with one another.**

We do not keep the **SECOND** most important command/standard of righteousness:

Matthew 22:39-40—

³⁹ **And the second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'**

⁴⁰ **On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets."**

Galatians 5:14—

For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in this: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

4. SUMMARY (18)

18 **“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”**

Psalm 36:1—

**Transgression declares to the ungodly within his heart;
There is no dread of God before his eyes.**

The root cause of sin lies and a failure to worship God.

Romans 1:20-21—

²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, both His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened.

APPLICATION

Mark 2:17—

And hearing this, Jesus said to them, “Those who are healthy do not have need for a physician, but only those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Spurgeon—

“You would not think of going to a doctor when you are ill, and saying to him, ‘Doctor, I will come to you when I get a little better.’ No, you feel your sickness, and you go to him just as you are, to be made better.”¹⁰

“The gospel does not say to you, ‘Go and make yourself better, and then come to Christ.’ No, it bids you come as you are, with all your sins, with all your filthiness, with all your guilt, and take Christ to be your all in all.”¹¹

¹⁰ Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Simplicity and Sublimity of Salvation," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 34 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1888), sermon delivered on June 3, 1888, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London.

¹¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Warrant of Faith," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 9 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1863), sermon delivered on September 20, 1863, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London.

CONCLUSION

As Paul has argued, understanding the nature of man is essential to understanding the universal need of the gospel.

So as we have seen, Paul argued that our nature as humans is utterly corrupted by sin—we are totally depraved—and therefore we are not able to save ourselves.

Sin corrupts our relationship with God and our relationships with one another.

You are NOT a good person—you CANNOT save yourself.

But God can!

Romans 1:16-17—

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous will live by faith.”

BENEDICTION

*Now may God be your exceeding joy,
Christ your unfailing hope,
and the Spirit your unfailing comforter,
in all your worship and work and troubles
until Jesus comes.
Amen.¹²*

¹² Dale Ralph Davis, *Grace Be with You: Benedictions from Dale Ralph Davis*, New Edition (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2019), 41.