

“TOTAL DEPRAVITY”

In the first half of chapter 7, the Preacher pointed out a number of ways in which we need to face up to the realities of life in this present age. He said that it is good for us to go to the house of mourning, because doing so reminds us of the fact that we too will eventually die. He said that we have to be patient as we live out the days that have been allotted to us in this world, because we will not have the full picture of our life until our days come to their appointed end. And then he said that we have to accept the fact that the crooked things in our lives, the crooks in our lot, are things of God’s own making. God makes the day of prosperity and the day of adversity. Everything that happens in our lives happens because God wills it to happen in the precise way that it happens. We need to accept this and meditate upon it, because this is the only way we will learn how to behave rightly under our trials and how to profit from them.

In the text we are studying today, the second half of chapter 7, the Preacher continues to emphasize the importance of facing up to the way the world really is. But here his focus is upon another aspect of reality: the fallenness of human nature. And he makes four points that relate to this theme in these verses. First, he shows us that we need to avoid the two extremes that people tend to fall into as they go about their lives in this fallen world. Second, he tells us that we need to accept the universality of man’s depravity. Third, he shows us how the fall has frustrated the relationship between the sexes. And fourth, he sums all of this up by reminding us of the root cause of our fallen condition.

Our passage begins with the Preacher making an observation that is made elsewhere in Scripture, most notably in the psalms: the observation that the wicked often prosper and the righteous often suffer. In the Preacher's own words: "There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing." It is sometimes the case that blatantly immoral and selfish people derive more enjoyment out of life than people who are seeking to walk with the Lord. This was something with which the writer of Psalm 73 struggled, as he tells us when he writes, "I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." [Ps. 73:3] The writer of that psalm eventually found comfort in knowing that God will judge the wicked, but the Preacher does not go that route in this text. Instead, he says that this matter calls for moderation on our part. "Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise...Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool." Do not be too righteous or too wise, but do not be too wicked either.

Now, we need to be careful not to misunderstand what the Preacher is saying here. He is not saying that genuine righteousness is only good in moderation. He does not mean that we should be half-hearted in our devotion to God. What is the greatest commandment, the summary of what it means to live a righteous life? It is the command to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. It would be utterly impossible for us to love God too much. Nor is the Preacher saying that we should be a little wise and a little foolish. He sees wisdom as a good thing. As he says in verse 19, "wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city." The

Preacher is not speaking against righteousness and wisdom here. He is warning us against *thinking of ourselves* as overly righteous or overly wise. In other words, this is a warning against self-righteousness, a warning against pride, a warning against thinking that you will prosper if you are meticulous in keeping God's law. The Preacher seems to have in mind the kind of religious zeal that leads to extreme forms of self-denial in hopes of gaining acceptance with God. Such a life is doubly miserable. On the one hand, it is impossible for anyone to be righteous enough to earn God's favor. And on the other hand, the person who tries to make himself righteous by acts of self-denial ends up denying himself the ordinary joys that the Lord provides for us in this life.

Along the same lines, when the Preacher warns us against being overly wicked he is not saying that it is okay to be a little wicked. The Scriptures make it very clear that God's people are to flee from evil. We are called to be absolutely ruthless in putting sin to death. This indicates that the Preacher is using the concepts of righteousness and wickedness in verses 16-17 in a slightly different manner than how he used them in verse 15. In verses 16-17, he is talking about two extremes that people fall into as they go about life in this fallen world. An "overly righteous" person is someone who fails to find appropriate enjoyment in the good things of this life, while an "overly wicked" person is someone who finds an inordinate amount of enjoyment in these things. The one denies the goodness of creation, while the other makes an idol out of it. Both extremes are to be avoided.

Instead, the Preacher provides us with this word of counsel: “It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.” We should take hold of true righteousness while not withholding our hand from the good things that we can enjoy in this life. Pursue true religion, but do not deny yourself the legitimate joys that God provides for us in this life. To put it negatively, do not pursue a false kind of righteousness that denies the goodness of creation, but do not make an idol out of this world either.

Verse 19 is a transitional saying that extols the benefits of wisdom. Wisdom makes a person more secure than a city that is defended by ten kings and their armies. And one of the ways in which wisdom protects us is by teaching us to accept the universality of human depravity. “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” Being mindful of this truth protects us from being caught off guard by sin. Don’t be shocked when people sin against you. You should not be surprised when you see the sin in other people’s lives. You should not be surprised when you see the sin in your own life. There is no one who never sins.

Verse 20 is an important verse relating to the doctrine of total depravity. It is an Old Testament equivalent to Paul’s well-known statement in Romans 3:23: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” I will have more to say about this verse when we come to the similar statement in verse 29 in a few moments.

After making this statement about the universality of human depravity, the Preacher turns in verses 21-22 to apply this truth to situations in which people say hurtful and

offensive things about us. He says that we should not take it to heart when people say such things. Now, I think we all know that this is easier said than done. It is very hard for us to overlook offenses. But the Preacher shows us how we can do it. Whenever someone says something against you, think back upon all of the things that you have said against others. And as you do this, remember that your perspective on such things is not objective. You and I are always going to be biased in our own favor. We have plenty of ways of justifying the things that we say against others, but we are reluctant to accept anything that another person might say to justify the things he has said against us. We do not measure ourselves by the same standard that we use to measure others. The doctrine of total depravity confronts us in this by telling us that we are no better than others.

There is no one who never sins, ourselves included.

In verses 23-25, we have another interlude with another set of sayings about wisdom. The Preacher tells us that he has sought to make sense of this fallen world, but he admits that he has not found a satisfactory answer. And here we see one of the Bible's many ironies. The first step in obtaining wisdom is to honestly admit your lack of wisdom. This is another part of reality that we have to face up to. We have to accept the fact that there is a lot about life that we are just not going to be able to understand.

One of the things that the Preacher finds so perplexing about life is the relationship between the sexes, and he describes his perplexity over this in verses 26-28. Verse 26, which speaks of a woman whose heart is snares and nets, might seem to be referring to a temptress, like the adulterous woman who is similarly described in the book of Proverbs.

That may be the case, but it seems to me that the larger context of this passage argues against that interpretation. Instead, the Preacher seems to be talking about the difficulty that men and women have in understanding and relating to each other in this fallen world. This is suggested by the statement in verse 28: “One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found.” This is a bit cryptic, but the Preacher seems to be saying that while he has been able to find a few men that he can understand and know as kindred spirits, he has not had any success in making sense of women.

These words may sound misogynistic, expressing a hatred of women, but we need to remember that this passage was written from a male perspective. A woman could just as easily say the same thing about men. Also, the reference to the fall of man in verse 29 indicates that these verses are looking back to the early chapters of Genesis. One of the results of the fall is that male-female relationships have been subjected to frustration, as we see so clearly when we look at the curses that God pronounced upon Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Wives will try to control their husbands, while husbands will experience frustration in the tasks to which they are called in this fallen world. As a result, the fundamental temptation for a wife is to be discontented about her marriage, while the fundamental temptation for a husband is to be irresponsible towards his wife and family.

While the fall has had a profound effect upon the way men and women relate to each other, the Preacher is not saying that it is utterly impossible for husbands and wives to get along. In fact, he even offers the following counsel in the next chapter: “Enjoy life with the wife whom you love.” And note that in this passage he says that the man who pleases

God escapes the snares of a woman's heart. In other words, those who walk with the Lord can find joy in their marriages, even though we still have to deal with the difficulties that the fall has brought about in the relationship between the sexes.

In verse 29, the Preacher sums up his reflections on human depravity with this statement: "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes." Man was not created sinful. We were created good and upright. We have fallen from a great height. The universal human condition is the result of the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve. We fell with them in their sin. In the words of our Westminster Confession of Faith,

“[Adam and Eve] being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary generation.” [WCF 6.3]

This is the doctrine of original sin. Because Adam served as the representative of the entire human race, his guilt was imputed to us. We have inherited his corrupted nature. Sinfulness marks every single one of us from birth. It is there in our hearts even before any actual sins are committed. It is the root and source of all of the sins that we commit. This is the reason why there is no one on earth who does good and never sins. We are people with a past. We all fell in Adam.

It is not surprising that this is a doctrine that many people find objectionable. We do not like to be told how bad we are. We prefer to think that we are basically good. But this is the deceitfulness of sin at work. Sin beguiles us and dupes us until our hearts become blind to the obvious. This is why sinful habits are so hard, and eventually impossible, to break. We get lulled to sleep. We tell ourselves that we are okay. We justify our sinful patterns of behavior. And the more we do this, the more confident we become in thinking that we are not all that bad. This is why we have such a hard time accepting the doctrines of original sin and total depravity. As C.S. Lewis once observed, “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.” [*Mere Christianity*, 35]

Ecclesiastes is a book that confronts us with reality. And the reality that we most need to face up to in this vain world is the reality of our sinfulness. We need to admit that we follow the devices and desires of our sinful hearts. And we need to be humbled by this. The work of being humbled under our sin is a task that we will never finish in this life. As Robert Murray M’Cheyne writes,

“Learn to be humbled far more than you ever have been. None of you have ever been sufficiently humbled under a sense of sin; for this reason, that none of you have ever seen fully the plague of your own heart.” [*Sermons*, 35]

As the Preacher keeps on telling us, to live in denial of the way things really are is the antithesis of wisdom. There is no getting around the fact of our sinfulness. The only way out of our plight as fallen human beings is to face up to it. We have to acknowledge our miserable condition and admit that there is nothing that we can do to change it. This is a mandatory step if you want to be delivered from your sin. Christ did not come for the healthy, but for the sick. If you do not face up to the truth about your sinfulness, you will never see how desperately you stand in need of the grace that is offered in the gospel. For, as Thomas Watson put it, “Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.” [cited in Paul Harvey, *When Sinners Say “I Do”*, 16] And as John Colquhoun writes,

“Be persuaded that you cannot be justified but on the ground of a perfect righteousness; and you have no such righteousness of your own. Rely, then, for the justification of life on the surety-righteousness of the Lord Jesus, freely offered in the gospel to you. Renew frequently your actings of faith on Him as your righteousness and strength, and glory in His finished work.” [*Sermons on Important Doctrines*, 180]