

The Total Depravity of Mankind

Lord's Day 3

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Bible Text: John 3:5

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The Scripture reading this morning is found in the gospel according to John 3. We'll read the first 21 verses,

“1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: 2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. 3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. 4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? 5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. 8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. 9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? 10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? 11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. 12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? 13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

“14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: 15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

“16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. 17

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

“18 He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. 20 For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. 21 But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.”

That is how far we read in God's holy inspired word. May God bless that word to our hearts.

In connection with Lord's Day 3, John 3:5, “Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Based upon this and many other passages of Scripture that the Catechism gives us the teaching that it does in Lord's Day 3. Lord's Day 3 questions and answers 6, 7, and 8 read as follows: Did God then create man so wicked and perverse? By no means but God created man good and after his own image in true righteousness and holiness that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love him and live with him in eternal happiness, to glorify and praise him. Whence then proceeds this depravity of human nature? From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise. Hence our nature has become so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin. Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness? Indeed we are, except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.

Beloved congregation, in our Lord Jesus Christ the first thing we have to know if we are going to live and die happily is how great our sins and miseries are. We have to know how bad it is if we are going to look for the Savior to give us the good in Christ Jesus. The last Lord's Day we saw that we are prone by nature to hate God and our neighbor, even for those who are regenerated children of God. There is no way a child of God can love God and their neighbor perfectly; we are prone by nature to hate God and our neighbor.

This Lord's Day takes us a step further and shows us how bad it is. Being prone to hate God and our neighbor is bad enough to damn us to the torments of hell but it's worse than that. It's worse than that. This Lord's Day helps us understand our misery all the more when it shows us three things: question and answer 6 shows us that our misery is not God's fault. God is not responsible for our misery. He created us good but that means that if we are miserable, we are the ones who are responsible for that. That's the next question and answer: Whence then proceeds this depravity of human nature? If it's not God's fault, who's is it? Question and answer 7 says it's our fault. It's man's fault. Adam, when he rebelled against God and we rebelled against God in Adam, we brought this misery upon ourselves so that we are now all conceived and born in sin. Our depravity is our fault.

How bad is it? Question and answer 8 asks the question: Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness? Here we come face-to-face with the horrible reality of our spiritual condition in Adam. Notice how powerful the question is: Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness? How is this answered? Indeed we are. Indeed we are. In Adam, our depravity is total. In Adam, our depravity is total. That is how bad it is and the only hope – the only hope for fallen mankind, is a mighty work of God's grace. Man cannot save himself. Only God's grace can deliver us. Only the regenerating power of God can deliver us from that depravity and that's what Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Let's consider that truth this morning as we learn of our misery. The total depravity of mankind: let's note in the first place the good creation that's not God's fault; secondly, the total depravity that man brought upon himself; lastly, the only hope for fallen mankind. Total depravity of mankind: the good creation, the total depravity and the only hope.

If you talk to unbelievers and we have occasion to do that and if you talk to them about the evil in this world or the evil in their own lives, it is not unlikely that they will, in some way, pin the blame on God. They will say things like this: "If God is so powerful, why does he allow sin and evil in the world?" As if it's God's fault then that there is sin and evil in the world. Why does he allow it in the world? They pin the blame on God. Or they say, "Surely, if God created all things very good, he could have prevented the fall. If he was so powerful to create everything, surely he was powerful enough to prevent the fall?" man's depravity. Therefore, they're pinning the blame on God. Or they say, "If God knows everything and he knew that the devil would tempt Adam and Eve, surely God could have stopped it," the depravity of man. In other words, they're implying it's God's fault and that really shouldn't surprise us. Wicked man will try to blame God for their own sin because they want to excuse their own sin. If they can say it's God's fault, then they're saying, "It's not really my fault."

And isn't that what Adam and Eve did in the Garden when they fell into sin? God came to them and what did Adam say after he had taken the fruit and God came to them? Adam said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat." Not only was Adam blaming Eve, but he was blaming the fact that God gave Eve to him, "the woman whom thou gavest." He was blaming God for his fall and Eve did much the same when she said, "The serpent beguiled me and I did eat." But who created the serpent?

Beloved, we do the same thing when we blame our circumstances or the people around us for our own sins. We say, "That person whom thou broughtest into my life," or "that circumstance," and so we shift the blame, we try to, from ourselves to God. "I'm excused when I walk in this sin because that circumstance made things so difficult and who brought about that circumstance? I'm excused from this sin because my parents raised me the way they did and so I am justified in walking the way I am and who gave us the parents that we have? I'm excused because of this person or that person." We put the

blame, we try to shift the blame off of ourselves and in the process, we are blaming God for our misery, for our depravity and as long as we do that, as long as we blame God for our sins and sinfulness – maybe we don't say those words, “It's God's fault,” but it's implied – as long as we blame God for our sins and sinfulness, then we will not look to him for salvation. As long as we blame God for sin, then we won't humble ourselves before him and seek forgiveness for our sins. If we have an excuse, then why do I need forgiveness? We won't confess our sins before him.

We need to know that our misery is not God's fault. Our sins are not God's fault. We have no one to blame but ourselves for our misery and Scripture is very clear about that, who is to blame for our sins. God didn't introduce evil. God didn't introduce evil into the world, just the opposite. What does Scripture say? God looked at his creation after he had made it and he said, “It is very good.” God saw everything that he had made and he made that declaration about it, “very good.” Man was very good. Adam and Eve were created very good. How good was that original creation? God created mankind in sinless perfection. God created Adam and Eve after his own image and likeness, not that mankind looked like God physically, that's not the idea, but they looked like God spiritually. God gave to Adam and Eve a reflection of his attributes so that they looked like God so that now they were able to fellowship with God in the Garden. All those attributes that made it possible for covenant fellowship, God gave to Adam and Eve. He created them very good.

That's what the catechism is talking about in question and answer 6. When it talks about God creating men good, after his own image in true righteousness and holiness, that he might – and notice the language that points to covenant fellowship – that he might rightly know God, his Creator, heartily love him and live with him in eternal happiness to glorify and praise him. In order for Adam to love God and to live with God in covenant fellowship, they needed God's image and likeness. They needed God's image and likeness.

What is included in God's image and likeness? We could take all kinds of guesses and theologians have done that, tried to come up with, “Well, what is included in God's image and likeness?” and they come up with ideas like this: “Well, man's ability to reason and his ability to communicate, the fact that we can speak, the animals can't do that.” But that's not what Scripture says about God's image and likeness. It doesn't say it has to do with language ability or man's ability to reason in his mind. What is included in God's image and likeness? Thankfully, Scripture does not leave us in the dark. Scripture tells us what's included in that image. In the first place, Colossians 3:10 talks about man being “renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.” Renewed in knowledge after the image. What is included in the image? Knowledge. The knowledge of God, not just head knowledge but a knowledge of covenant fellowship, a knowledge of friendship is included in God's image.

But if we want that knowledge or friendship and fellowship with God, we must also be righteous and holy and so Scripture also talks about that righteousness and holiness. In Ephesians 4:24, it talks about God's people being created “in righteousness and true

holiness after God's image.” “Created after God” is the words that are used in our version. Created after God: that is after God's image and likeness. Righteousness and true holiness are included in God's image. God gave that to Adam and Eve in the Garden for God gave everything to Adam and Eve in the Garden. Those attributes were reflected in them, that allowed them to experience covenant fellowship with God. They could heartily love him. They could live with God in fellowship. They would, therefore, glorify and praise God as he deserves. Our misery is not God's fault. God created Adam and Eve good. He gave them everything they needed but they threw it away.

If it's not God's fault, if our misery is not God's fault, it's our own fault. When God put Adam and Eve in the Garden, he gave them two trees. The children know about those trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve could eat of the tree of life and to eat of that tree of life was essentially to say yes to God as if to say, “When we eat of this tree of life we are saying we want to live with God in eternal happiness. We want to fellowship with God forever.” They could say yes to God by eating of that tree.

But there's another way that they had to say yes to God and that was by saying no to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God told them, “You may not eat of that tree.” By putting that tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden, God was testing Adam and Eve's devotion to himself and we know what happened. God told them to say no to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, to say yes to him. Adam and Eve failed. The devil came and tempted them. It is evident from the history of that fall of Adam and Eve, taking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it's evident that God created their natures in such a way that they were able to fall. Even though he had created them perfectly holy and righteous, they were able to fall.

And we know what happened then. The devil came in the form of a serpent and tempted Eve to say yes to the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and to say no to God. The devil said to Eve, “God knows if you eat of that tree, you will be as gods,” and the implication is, “Eve, God knows that if you take of that tree, you're going to get something good for yourselves and God is withholding that from you. Say no to God, Eve and say yes to tree, say yes to yourselves,” and Adam and Eve did that. Eve took of the fruit and gave to Adam and in taking of that fruit, they rejected God.

Now, people say today that that was Adam and Eve. “Why must I pay for what they did thousands of years ago? I didn't take of the tree.” The answer is this: why must we pay for the sin of Adam? Because Adam represented the entire human race. Every man, woman and child, Christ Jesus accepted and were represented by Adam in the Garden. Romans 5:12 declares that. We read, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” It goes on in Romans 5 to declare that headship of Adam over the human race.

But here the idea is this: not that death passed upon all men because every one of us sinned, although that's true. Every one of us sins but that's not the reason that death passed upon all men. Death passed upon all men, according to this verse, because when

Adam sinned, we sinned in Adam. When Adam ate of the fruit, we ate of the fruit because Adam represented us and we proceed, the whole human race, proceeds from Adam. When Adam failed to pay the debt that God demanded of him, the debt of perfect love and perfect obedience, when Adam failed to pay the debt, the debt is passed on to the whole human race. It's the debtor we talked about not so long ago who owed 10,000 talents to the king, that parable Jesus told. The king was going to sell not only him but his wife and his children because his debt became his family's debt and that's the way it is with Adam. Adam's debt became our debt, the debt of the whole human race. His guilt is our guilt and the result of that is God's curse upon humankind. The result of that is death. God had told them, Adam and Eve, he told them, "The day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." God warned them. Romans 5:12 again, "So death passed upon all men for that all have sinned." Just as God had warned, not just sickness. God didn't say, "The day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt be sick" or "sickly." No, he said, "Thou shalt surely die." Death passed upon all men. Spiritual death passed upon all men.

Now, as we are born in Adam, born in the line of generations from Adam, our nature's are so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin. In Adam, conceived and born in Adam, we are stillborn, we are spiritually stillborn. We are in the womb spiritually dead. By nature we are totally depraved. That's what that's saying and that's what the catechism is talking about in question and answer 8. Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness? Indeed we are. We are not just somewhat incapable of doing good as if we could do some things that are pleasing to God. No, by nature, we are wholly incapable. Completely incapable of doing any good and so the Proverbs tell us that the sacrifice of the wicked, that which appears good on the outside, it looks good. The sacrifice of the wicked, how does God view that? As an abomination. The sacrifice of the wicked is abomination to God. It is detestable to him because there is nothing good in it.

What does Romans say? "There is none good. No, not one. There is none that understandeth. There is none that seeketh after God." That's the way, beloved, that we are all by nature. We cannot love God. We cannot love our neighbor at all, not with a true love. We can show something outwardly, people do that, but we can't love them truly at all. That's the totally depravity that Adam brought upon the whole human race and that depravity affects our wills, it affects our understanding, it affects our affections, it affects our inclinations and it makes them completely depraved.

Some people imagine that the depravity of mankind is not that bad. It's not really that bad and if you talk to an unbeliever, you will not get them to admit that their depravity is complete and utter. You will not get them to admit that. Generally, they'll say something like this, "Deep down, I'm actually a pretty good person. At least I'm not as bad as others." Or if they are guilty – if you go to a maximum security prison and talk to a serial killer – even they will not admit that they are absolutely and totally depraved. They will blame their sins on their circumstances, "My parents raised me in this way," and "I was in this difficult circumstance and that's why I am the way I am but it's not my fault." The problem is, they won't believe what God says about them. They will not believe that they are miserable creatures in themselves.

What does God say? That mankind is dead. That mankind is spiritually dead. Ephesians 2, "And you being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh." That's us by nature, beloved, and I don't know how else to say it but "dead means dead." It doesn't mean "sick." Someone who is dead cannot blink an eye to do good. What can a dead person do? Children, do you know what a dead person can do? They can only rot and stink. Somebody who is spiritually dead cannot desire, much less do, any good in God's sight. All we can do, all those who are spiritually dead, all we can do by nature is abominable, stinking works. We can bring a sacrifice that's abominable. That's you and me by nature, totally depraved in Adam. Indeed we are.

And if we are going to live and die happily in this life, we need to understand that about ourselves. We need to understand that about ourselves because otherwise we won't look outside of ourselves but when we understand that, when we say, "I am spiritually dead by nature," when we understand our depravity, then we will not hope in ourselves. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." Now, he's not just making a general statement about a person being born from another person but he's making a theological statement, "That which is born of the flesh can only inherit the properties that it got from its parents." All those who are born naturally obtain from their parents the corruption that they obtained from their parents that they obtained ultimately from Adam. All we can get in our natural birth is flesh. All those who are only born in Adam will inherit Adam's complete and utter depravity.

Spiritual life, and that was Jesus' point because he goes on to say, "And that which is born of the spirit is spirit." In other words, that which is born of the flesh cannot bring forth spiritual life. Something that is totally depraved and dead cannot bring forth life. Spiritual life cannot arise from the flesh. We need to know that because otherwise, we will look to ourselves. God wants us to look outside of ourselves to Jesus Christ. We need to look outside of ourselves for salvation. We need to see our utter and complete helplessness in ourselves if we are going to look for salvation from the only source, Jesus Christ. That is our only hope. Jesus Christ is the only hope.

That's the gospel message proclaimed throughout the Scriptures. Romans 5:6, "For when we were yet without strength," now we're speaking of the ungodly, the totally depraved, "when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly." That's the gospel. He didn't die for somebody who was better than somebody else. No, he died for the ungodly when we were yet completely without strength. When we were dead in our trespasses and sins. That means, by nature we didn't even have the smallest inclination to do any spiritual good. We were complete rebels, ungodly. Even then, Christ died for us.

Now that Jesus has bought us with his precious blood, he's not going to stop there. Now that he has bought us with his precious blood, he sends forth his Holy Spirit, the spirit given to him by God. Where does that spirit work? In our hearts. Jesus talks about the work of that spirit when he talks to Nicodemus in John 3:8. He says, "The wind bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh and wither it goeth. So is everyone that is born of the spirit." So is everyone that is born by

the power of the spirit. How does the spirit work? Just like the wind: it blows, it goes wherever it wants and nobody can stop that irresistible grace of the Holy Spirit.

What is that wonderful work of the spirit? Well, Jesus speaks of that in the context. He causes us to be born again. He causes us to be regenerated. Both of those terms mean the same thing. "Except a man be born again," Jesus said to Nicodemus, "except he be born of water and of the spirit." It's the spirit's work, "except he be born of water and of the spirit, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Now, when Jesus mentions water, he's not talking about physical water, that you have to be born with physical water and the spirit. No, those two things are pointing to the same work of the Holy Spirit and what does water do? Water purifies. Unless there is a purifying work of the Holy Spirit, you cannot see the kingdom of God.

Without that new birth, we would remain blind to our own misery, we would still think about ourselves as the wicked think about themselves. We would be blind to the truth. Not only the truth of our misery, we would be blind to the truth of our salvation in Jesus Christ. We would think to ourselves if we were not regenerated, if we did not experience that new birth, we would not see the kingdom of Christ. We would say that's all nonsense and then we would not embrace Jesus Christ as our only righteousness. We would remain completely and utterly depraved. But when we are born again, the Holy Spirit infuses us and that's the way the canons talk, the Holy Spirit infuses us with new qualities so that we see those things that we would never see unless we were born again. We would never see the truth of the gospel unless we were born again. We would never begin to walk in God's way unless we were born again. When we see the misery that is ours by nature, then we will understand that salvation is of the Lord. It's not of us. Our hope is not in ourselves but only in Jesus Christ.

Beloved, do you see your misery? Do I see my misery? Then look away from yourselves and look to Jesus Christ for all of your salvation. Amen.

Our Father which art in heaven, we thank thee for that new birth. We thank thee that thou dost come to us in thy grace and thou dost open our eyes and our hearts that we understand the truth of our misery so that we also look to Jesus Christ whom thou also revealest to us. May we ever know that salvation is from thee and from thee alone. May we ever be thankful in all of our lives for that gracious salvation which is ours in him. Go with us now, we pray. Give us thy grace that we may praise thee. We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.