

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE
(LESSON SEVEN)
THE RADICAL CORRUPTION OF MAN
(PART ONE)

Radical corruption is the term that we will use to summarize what the Bible teaches about the spiritual condition of fallen human beings. The doctrine of radical corruption is in harmony with what the Word of God declares that as a result of the Fall of Adam, every part of man — his mind, his will, his emotions and his flesh — have been corrupted by sin. In other words, sin affects all areas of our being including who we are and what we do. It penetrates to the very core of our being and affects every area of it. The doctrine of radical corruption acknowledges the biblical truth that we sin because we are sinners by nature.

There are persons who are of the view that human beings commit sins because society exerts a negative influence upon us. The problem is seen with our environment, not with our nature. This explanation for the universality of sin raises the question, how did society become corrupt in the first place? Our Lord indicated in **Matthew 7:17** that a good tree does not produce corrupt fruit. Since the fruit is universally corrupt we must look for the root of the problem in the tree. The Bible clearly teaches that our original parents, Adam and Eve, fell into sin. Subsequently, every human being has been born with a sinful, corrupt nature. The truth is that, even if the Bible did not plainly teach this, we would have had to conclude that it is so from the obvious universality of sin. The Fall of man and the effects of the Fall, however, are points of divine revelation. They point to what we refer to as Original sin.

Original sin does not refer primarily to the first sin committed by Adam and Eve. Original sin refers primarily to the result of their sin which was the corruption of the human race. Original sin refers to the fallen condition in which we were born. The doctrine of original sin teaches that human beings commit sin because we are sinners. We are not sinners because we sin, but rather, we sin because we are sinners. Since the fall of man, we have inherited a corrupted condition of sinfulness. We now have a sin nature. We all commit sins because it is our nature to commit sins. The word “radical” has its root in the Latin word *radix* which means “root or core.” The word refers to something that permeates to the root or core of a thing. It does not refer to something superficial, incidental or minor. The Biblical view is that the effects of the Fall extend and penetrate to the very core of our being.

The radical corruption of man is clearly revealed throughout the Bible. Let us consider the following passages which underscore the total sinfulness of human nature:

Genesis 2:17

“But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

Genesis 6:5

“And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

Psalms 51:5

“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: *“Look, I was guilty of sin from birth, a sinner the moment my mother conceived me.”*

Psalms 58:3

“The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.”

Ecclesiastes 7:20

“For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.”

Ecclesiastes 9:3

“This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.”

Isaiah 1:4-6

“Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment.”

The **New English Translation** renders the passage as follows: *“The sinful nation is as good as dead, the people weighed down by evil deeds. They are offspring who do wrong, children who do wicked things. They have abandoned the LORD, and rejected the Holy One of Israel. They are alienated from him. Why do you insist on being battered? Why do you continue to rebel? Your head has a massive wound, your whole body is weak. From the soles of your feet to your head, there is no spot that is unharmed. There are only bruises, cuts, and open wounds. They have not been cleansed or bandaged, nor have they been treated with olive oil.”*

Isaiah 53:6

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Isaiah 64:6-7

“But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities.”

The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows:

“We are all like one who is unclean, all our so-called righteous acts are like a menstrual rag in your sight. We all wither like a leaf; our sins carry us away like the wind. No one invokes your name, or makes an effort to take hold of you. For you have rejected us and handed us over to our own sins.”

Jeremiah 13:23

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.”

Jeremiah 17:9

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”

The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: *“The human mind is more deceitful than anything else. It is incurably bad. Who can understand it?”*

John 3:18-19

“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. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”

Romans 3:9-19

9 What then? Are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin;

10 As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:

11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.

12 They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

13 Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips:

14 Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness:

15 Their feet are swift to shed blood:

16 Destruction and misery are in their ways:

17 And the way of peace have they not known:

18 There is no fear of God before their eyes.

19 Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

Romans 8:6-8

“For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.”

1 Corinthians 2:14

“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: *“The unbeliever does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. And he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”*

Ephesians 2:1-3

“And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: 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.”

Colossians 2:13

“And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses.”

The doctrine of radical corruption is not intended to signify that lost, unregenerate human beings are wholly evil in everything they do, but rather that nothing they do is ever entirely good. In so far as the motive for an act determines the moral character and spiritual significance of the act, every deed has something of sinfulness about it because the will of human beings is fatally corrupted by their fallen nature. Not all motives are equally sinful, but no motive is wholly pure. Hence, from a moral and spiritual point of view, human activity is always tainted as to its motive, to a greater or lesser extent. This fundamental impurity of motive is the reason for saying that man is radically corrupt. This radical corruption is reflected in the entire impotence of unsaved persons towards any spiritual good; in this respect lost, unregenerate man is not merely sick but dead. It, therefore, follows that the salvation of human beings is altogether a work of God, initiated and carried through by Him without any help from them.

When we speak of the radical corruption of human beings, we are not implying that human beings do not perform good deeds.

In **Matthew 7:11** our Lord Himself said, *“If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?”* There is nothing incompatible between the doctrine of radical corruption and the ability of human beings to perform deeds which may be characterized as good. The ability of man to do good deeds in no way challenges his basic corruption. What is corrupt in human nature is motivation. Human beings have the ability to **do** good. What we lack is the ability to **be** good!

In **Matthew 7:21-23** our Lord said, *“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”*

We see here that it is quite possible in the Judgment for persons to claim truthfully, “Lord, Lord, in your name we have done many wonderful works” Their claim is not unjustified because it has reference only to deeds themselves and nothing more. The Judge can say with equal truth, *“I never knew you: Depart from Me, ye that work iniquity.”* This is because a deed, no matter how good it is in itself, is really a work of iniquity when the motivation behind it is wrong. It is not the deeds so much that count but the motives, and the unsaved person is **altogether** sinful. A man may therefore, be full of good works and outwardly have the appearance of a beautiful marble building, spotlessly clean. Yet the building itself may be only a tomb painted white on the outside while inside is a rotting spiritual corpse. This is a saddening truth. The spiritual corruption of man is radical. The radical corruption has reference to his motive, not to his works.

The doctrine of Original Sin teaches that sin is an inherited disease which inevitably bears fruit in the form of sins. As long as an individual is naturally born he or she is lost, dead in trespasses and sins. There is no natural way in which this situation can be remedied. By his disobedience one man, Adam, made human nature sinful (**1 Corinthians 15:21-22**). Thereafter, human nature has made every man a sinner. We all inherit a fatal disease. The terrible symptoms of this disease inevitably find expression in our lives.

To put it another way, we may say that we are born in **SIN** (singular). **SIN** is the disease. The symptoms of the disease are **SINS** (plural).

My brothers and sisters, the truth is that human nature has been corrupted at its source in such a way that it is incapable of any kind of self-help. Human beings are not merely lost and searching consciously for a way out of their predicament: They are in fact as dead spiritually as the physically dead are dead physically. We are so hopelessly lost that we cannot even recognize the nature of our lost condition for what it is.

There are two basic positions that one can take in this matter. The first is that man's lost condition, though it is severe, is nevertheless only partial, leaving him with some hope of self-redemption. This self-help may take the form of active good works, or it may take the form merely of an earnest desire to be helped, or it may take the form of a spirit of non-resistance towards the help that is provided. But it is supposed that there is some faint glow in the ashes of man's heart which God can fan into a new flame. The other position is that the fire has simply gone out in the heart of man. It has died! There is nothing which can be fanned into flame again. The position that a person adopts will determine virtually all else in his or her theology. Are we to begin with man and some imagined potential for goodness or are to begin with God who must be the author of salvation in its entirety? I believe that the biblical position is that man is completely dead spiritually and all the initiative must be God's.