

"Total Depravity - is it Biblical?"

Answer: Total Depravity is a phrase or name that is used to summarize what the Bible teaches about the spiritual condition of fallen man. It is the “T” in the acronym TULIP, which is commonly used to enumerate what are known as the five points of Calvinism or the doctrines of grace. Because the name “total depravity” can cause people to have wrong ideas about what is meant, some people prefer to use terms like “Total Inability”, “Righteous Incapability”, “Radical Corruption” or even “Moral Inability”. Yet what is important is not the name assigned to the doctrine but how accurately the doctrine summarizes what the Bible teaches about the spiritual condition of fallen man. No matter which name you use to refer to “Total Depravity” the fact remains that when properly understood it is an accurate description of what the Bible does teach on this important subject.

While often misunderstood, the doctrine of Total Depravity is an acknowledgement that the Bible teaches that as a result of the fall of man ([Genesis 3:6](#)) every part of man—his mind, will, emotions and 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 so that everything is tainted by sin and “...all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” before a holy God ([Isaiah 64:6](#)). It acknowledges that the Bible teaches that we sin because we are sinners by nature. Or as Jesus says “So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.” ([Matthew 7:17-18](#)).

The total depravity of man is seen throughout the Bible. Man’s heart is “deceitful and desperately wicked” ([Jeremiah 17:9](#)) and the thoughts of his heart are “continually evil” ([Genesis 6:5](#)). The Bible also teaches us that man is born dead in transgression and sin ([Psalm 51:5](#), [Psalm 58:3](#), [Ephesians 2:1-5](#)). The Bible teaches that because unregenerate man is “dead in transgressions” ([Ephesians 2:5](#)), he is held captive by a love for sin ([John 3:19](#); [John 8:34](#)) so that he will not seek God ([Romans 3:10-11](#)) because he loves the darkness ([John 3:19](#)) and does not understand the things of God ([1 Corinthians 2:14](#)). Therefore men suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness ([Romans 1:18](#)) and continue to willfully live in sin. Because they are totally depraved this sinful lifestyle seems right to men ([Proverbs 14:12](#)) so they reject the Gospel of Christ as foolishness ([1 Corinthians 1:18](#)) and their mind is “hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is unable to do so.” ([Romans 8:7](#)).

The Apostle Paul really summarizes the total depravity of man in [Romans 3:9-18](#). He begins this passage by saying that “both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.” Simply put this means that man is under the control of sin or is controlled by his sin nature (his natural tendency to sin). The fact that unregenerate people are controlled by their selfish, sinful tendencies should not come as a surprise to any parent. What parent has to teach their children to be selfish, to covet what someone else has or to lie? Those actions come naturally from the child’s sin nature. Instead the parent must devote much time to teaching the child the importance of telling the truth, of sharing instead of being selfish, of obeying instead of rebelling, etc.

Then in the rest of this passage Paul quotes extensively from the Old Testament in explaining how sinful man really is. For example we see that: 1—no one is without sin, 2—no one seeks after God, 3—there is no one who is good, 4—their speech is corrupted by sin, 5—their actions are corrupted by sin, 6—and above all they have no fear of God. So when one considers even these few verses mentioned above it becomes abundantly clear the Bible does indeed teach that fallen man is “totally depraved” because sin affects all of him

including his mind, will and emotions so that “There is none who does good, no not one” ([Romans 3:12](#)).

There is a common misconception regarding total depravity. It does not mean that man is as wicked or sinful as he could be, nor does it mean that man is without a conscience or any sense of right or wrong. Neither does it mean that man does not or cannot do things that seem to be good when viewed from a human perspective or measured against a human standard. It does not even mean that man cannot do things that seem to conform outwardly to the Law of God. What the Bible does teach and what total depravity does recognize is that even the “good” things man does are tainted by sin because they are not done for the glory of God and out of faith in Him ([Romans 14:23](#); [Hebrews 11:6](#)). While man looks upon the outward acts and judges them to be good, God looks upon not only the outward acts but also the inward motives that lay behind them, and because they proceed from a heart that is in rebellion against Him and they are not done for His Glory even these good deeds are like “filthy rags” in His sight. In other words, fallen man’s good deeds are motivated not by a desire to please God but by our own self interest and are thus corrupted to the point where God declares that there is “no one who does good, no not one!”

Since Scripture is very clear that all of man is affected by sin and so much so that “no one seeks after God,” then how can anyone possibly become a Christian? The answer is that God must overcome man’s depravity in such a way that man is able to recognize his spiritual state and his hopeless condition apart from the grace of God. Man’s spiritually blind eyes must be open and the bondage of sin that renders him hopelessly enslaved must be broken so that he can respond in faith to the Gospel message and the atoning work of Christ on the cross. Some Christians believe that God accomplishes this through some type of universal grace whereby God brings man to a condition where he has the ability to choose or reject Him. Others believe that for a man who is “dead in trespasses and sins” to be able to understand and respond to the Gospel in faith, he must first be born again or regenerated by the Holy Spirit ([John 3:3](#)). It is only after God infuses spiritual life in a dead sinner that he can “see the kingdom of God.” Those that hold this view see this as being a sovereign act of God, whereby men are born again “not of the blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” ([John 1:12-13](#)).

However even when properly understood, many people will rebel or reject the doctrine of total depravity, but that fact should not surprise us since the world generally thinks of man as being basically good. Therefore the idea that man by nature is a depraved sinner runs contrary to most modern religious, psychological and philosophical views of the basic nature of man. But the fact is that the Bible does teach the depravity of the human heart and the root cause of man’s problem is not the environment he is raised in but that by nature man has a wicked and selfish heart. Properly understood, the doctrine of total depravity will destroy the hopes of those who place their faith in any type of works-based system of salvation and recognize that God’s sovereign grace is man’s only hope. While the doctrine of total depravity destroys man’s self righteousness and any misconceptions about man’s ability to be saved through his own free will, it leaves one asking the same question the disciples asked of Jesus in [Matthew 19:25-26](#): “Then who can be saved?” Of course the answer remains the same: “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” ([Matthew 19:25-26](#)).

As the first of the five doctrines of what is called “Calvinism,” the doctrine of total depravity correctly focuses man’s attention on the rest of these “doctrines of grace” which declare the wondrous work of God in the salvation of sinners.