

The Canons of Dort: Total Depravity
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
November 6, 2022 – AM Sermon
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Romans 3:9-26,

This is the third week of our series on the five heads of doctrine in the canons of Dort, today we finally reach the head of doctrine, the part of the Canons of Dort, that you've all been waiting for! Today we talk about Total Depravity!!! We'll start by reading the first three articles from this part of the canons. Those are found on page 130 of your 'Our Faith' book. Listen carefully and you will notice that parts of these paragraphs have been used in our call to confession for the last three weeks.

I think you will agree: that is a sober assessment of the human condition. In our fallen state, we human beings are subject to blindness, darkness, perversity, defiance, hardness and impurity. We are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, and dead in our sins. Not a great report card, right? F's all the way down. The words 'total depravity' don't actually appear in the articles, but you can see why people used them to summarize what the Canons teach. Human beings are a wretched mess!

And maybe that seems a little over the top to you. I mean are human beings really that bad? Most of you seem pretty nice! A lot of the people we run into out there seem like pretty decent folk. My wife Linda is a kindergarten teacher and a couple of weeks ago she was teaching her children about bears. As part of that she showed her students the bear camera from Alaska's National wildlife refuge. There is a bear camera in the Alaskan hinterlands and it's trained on a waterfall in the park where all the grizzlies go to catch salmon. When they come to the waterfall, the salmon jump and the bears catch the them. They get themselves a meal. The kindergarten children loved watching this live spectacle, but as they watched, they noticed that there was one bear at the falls that kept missing the fish. All the bears were munching happily on salmon, but this poor bear was striking out. They all started cheering for the hungry bear. "Come on Mr. Bear you can do it!" They were all into it and when Mr. Bear finally caught a fish, a big cheer went up from the whole classroom. "Woohoo! He got one!" Isn't that nice?! The kids naturally started cheering for the underdog. They were inclined toward the weak, toward the bear that was left out.

Those cheering kids don't seem evil, they seem nice. They don't seem full of perversity, defiance, and hardness of heart - unfit for any saving good, they seem decent. We see humans acting in these kind and generous ways all the time. Are human beings really that bad? Are the Canons of Dort overstating the problem?

Paul doesn't seem to think so. Let's go to our Bible reading now and listen to Paul's assessment of human nature. Read Romans 3:9-26.

At the beginning of that reading, Paul offers an assessment of human nature that is every bit as bleak as the Canons. For two chapters leading up to our passage, Paul has been making an argument that both Jews and Gentiles are equally broken. Having the law hasn't made the Jews anymore righteous than the Gentiles. Everyone's a mess. Jews and Gentiles alike are under the power of sin. Then, in verses 10 through 18 he summarizes his bleak assessment of the human condition: No one is righteous, we are all worthless. Our tongues practice deceit, our feet are swift to shed blood, ruin and misery mark our ways. It's a litany of human corruption every bit as harsh as the canons. Paul gets this litany of human corruption from the Old Testament.

According to the footnotes in your pew Bibles, Paul strings together 8 different text from Psalms, Ecclesiastes and Isaiah to make his point, and his point is “It’s not just me talking, the whole Bible says that we’re broken.”

So Paul doesn’t think the canons are over the top. He agrees with them.

And so do a lot of modern philosophers. The secular world doesn’t use the words Total Depravity to describe the situation, but most modern thinkers have a pretty bleak view of humanity. I was reading the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck this week. In his reflections on Total Depravity, he quotes a whole group of philosophers who think human beings are wretched creatures. Here’s Arthur Schopenhauer, the famous German Philosopher who influenced Nietzsche and who was not a believer. He said that government and social expectations keep people from acting on their depraved instincts, but once those constraints are removed humans will run wild. *“Insatiable greed, despicable money-hunger, deeply concealed falseness, and spiteful evil again spring to the surface...thousands of people who before our eyes are peacefully comingling in public must be viewed as just so many tigers and wolves whose mouth has been secured by a strong muzzle.”*

It's secular total depravity. People are all tigers and wolves. There is no one righteous, not even one.

But what about all the nice things children do? What about those kids cheering for that bear? What about the way you see people rally round each other to help each other in crisis? After the hurricane in Florida, people helped each other out. They showed real kindness! How can Paul and the Canons and Schopenhauer deny all that human goodness!?

Well, I can’t speak for Schopenhauer, but Paul and the Canons aren’t denying that human beings often do nice things. Human beings are created in the image of God and that image isn’t erased by our sins. After God created us he said, it is good! And that God-created goodness still shines in us. There is something good and beautiful in every human being. However, according to Paul and the Canons, that good has been infected by sin. Notice that the canons don’t say that we are incapable of any good; they say we are incapable of any *saving* good. There is a tragic flaw in us. That flaw doesn’t eliminate our ability to do good and beautiful things; it just means that if it’s up to us, those good and beautiful things will end badly. Because, while it may take a lifetime of hard work and faithfulness and kindness to build something good, it only takes a moment of weakness, a moment of anger, a moment of passion, to bring it all crashing down. How long does it take to build a good friendship? It takes a lifetime of time and kindness and attention. How long does it take to destroy that good thing? You can bring it all down with thirty seconds of angry words. That thirty seconds is in all of us.

In his book *Calvinism at the Las Vegas Airport*, Rich Mouw tells about something that he did as a boy. He was mostly a good kid. His teachers said nice things about him and parent-teacher conferences and he was well-liked. But Mouw remembers an incident from when he was seven years old. He and a friend were out walking to and from school every day, and as part of that trip they took a shortcut that led them along some railroad tracks. Trains that carried coal used that route and lumps of coal would fall from the cars along the trackside. On many mornings, they would see a child who was younger than themselves walking along the tracks with a pail. This child was from a very poor family. His Father had died, so his mother would send him to the tracks to kind a little coal so that they could heat their homes. One day, Mouw and his friend hid in the bushes and watched the boy collect the coal. When his bucket was full they jumped out, pushed him to the ground and dumped out his coal, scattering it in every direction. The little boy cried, while they walked away laughing. Mouw says recalling the incident still fills him with shame and brings tears to his eyes. *“I try to imagine what was going on in my heart when I performed that absolutely gratuitous bit of evil, and I cannot*

fathom it. I don't understand how the boy who ate the time loved to sing, "Jesus Loves the little children of the world" could also take delight in a child's tears."

You see, that's in children too. The same sweet children who cheer for the bear and hug their teacher will hide in the bushes and commit random acts of cruelty.

The Bible and the canons teach two things about the way sin has infected us. This infection is pervasive. All our faculties are corrupted. Our sin brings about the distortion of judgment of our minds. Sin causes impurity in our emotions. Sin causes defiance in our wills. Sin brings hardness to our hearts. Hearts, wills, minds, emotions. While good remains in all those faculties, they are all infected. There is no human faculty you and I can rely on to build a good future. Our reason won't work. The enlightenment thought that the light of reason would save humanity, but our minds are corrupted. As Genesis 6 says, our thoughts are evil all the time. Our hearts won't save us. Listen to your heart, says modern romanticism. But your heart won't save you. Because, as Genesis 8 says, 'every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.' The heart is broken. And so is the will. And so are our emotions. The effects of sin are pervasive. Every human faculty is busted.

Sin is not only pervasive; it is original. That is to say, you are born with it. That's the main point being made in Article 2. We do not learn sin by imitation. It's not that we are born good and innocent, but then we watch other people do mean things and that leads us astray. No, say the Canons, we receive sin not by "imitation," but by "propagation." Psalm 51, "Surely I have been sinful from the moment my mother conceived me." Both the corruption and the guilt of sin are in us from the very beginning, and, as the canons say, on our own, "*we are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform our distorted nature, or even to dispose ourselves to such reform.*" So sin is deep and wide. It's original and pervasive. As Romans 3 says, "*we are all under the power of sin...there is no one righteous, not even one.*"

So far this has not been a particularly cheerful message, and maybe that's to be expected given the subject matter. When the minister says, "Today's sermon is on total depravity" you don't settle in for something light and fun. But this is a gospel sermon. We are here to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ! Where is the gospel in this message of human sinfulness?

I want to argue that the message puts us in a perfect place to receive the gospel. I noted earlier that Christians aren't the only ones who have a dim view of the human condition. I quoted Schopenhauer who said that if the veil of polite society is removed we are all wolves and tigers. It's kind of a secular version of total depravity, and I think that more people than ever hold to a secular version of this doctrine. Is it easy to find people who are optimistic about humanity these days? Is it easy to find people who are excited about the future? Not so much. There is so much pessimism these days.

If you are a person who holds a secular view of total depravity, what do you do with your pessimism? If you believe that we are only ones who can solve our problems, AND you believe people are just a bunch of wolves and tigers, what hope is there? Without God, your best case scenario is to find some short term pleasure to take your mind off the misery. Smoke something or drink something to take the edge off. Or take measures to protect yourself against the world's depravity. Go find a tribe of strong wolves and hunker down against the tigers. Get ready to take those tigers out. It's you or them, so do whatever it takes.

One of the ways I see the secular doctrine of total depravity taking hold is in the birth rate. The birth rate is way down in the west. People just aren't having babies anymore. Having a child is an act of hope. When two people decide to have a baby they are imagining future joy, future happiness. But people are having a hard time

imagining that lately. They look at themselves and they think how can I be a good parent, they look at the world and think, “What a mess,” and so they say, “I don’t want to bring a child into this world.”

If all we have is human power under the sun, things are pretty hopeless right now. But the gospel of Jesus Christ is that there is hope and help beyond ourselves.

Yes, we human beings are busted, but in Jesus Christ help has come from the outside. In Jesus Christ, this busted humanity is rebooted. Jesus Christ is humanity 2.0! He is the new Adam. Our will is busted, but nothing will stop him from accomplishing his purposes. Our understanding may be corrupted, but he is the wisdom of God and can fathom all mysteries. Our emotions are a mess, but his love is perfect. Our hearts are tainted, but his heart is pure, and we are held in his heart and nothing can separate us from him. *“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but all are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ!”*

In Jesus another kind of infection has been released into the world. An infection of goodness, an infection of grace, an infection of justice, an infection of righteousness, and its making everything new. That good infection is in us and its slowly changing us together. That good infection will make everything new. This is the message a hopeless and cynical world needs to hear and longs to hear.

Total Depravity tells the truth. We can’t fix this. We’re broken. The gospel tells a greater truth. Jesus has died and has risen, and he is fixing everything.

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