

Sermon 63: Romans 8:7-8: Total inability

OUTLINE

The unbeliever is hostile to God
The unbeliever does not submit to God
The unbeliever cannot submit to God
The unbeliever cannot please God

INTRODUCTION

'There is no original perversity in the human heart.' This is a statement made by the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. He believed that we are not born sinners but are made into sinners and corrupted by society. He was one of the main architects of the French Revolution, as well as one of the main influences in education as we know it. He was also a popularizer of what we now call the idea of the 'noble savage' that man apart from modern society is innocent and uncorrupted. This romantic notion of human goodness is the dominant one of our own day, it is the view that is espoused in most films, but it is the exact opposite of the view of Scripture and verses that we are considering this morning.

Even among Christians we see those who have held and hold views that are not what the Scripture teaches. Pelagius was a monk who felt it his mission to purify the church, but he held a view of human sinfulness that taught that we do not inherit a sinful nature from Adam, but that we are all born neutral and are free to do good or evil just as Adam originally was. And even upon sinning we were restored back to neutral and suffered no judgement of a corrupted nature. Pelagius like Rousseau believed that sin was outside of us and not within us.

Then there is the semi-Pelagian view, this view sees man as sick in sin but not dead in sin, his mind is unaffected, his will is unaffected, he merely needs education and motivation to be good, and then drawing on his own resources he is able to accomplish the good that God commands of us. This is still far from what the Scriptures teach that we are dead in sin and cannot understand spiritual things apart from the Spirit, nor embrace Christ apart from the Spirit.

Then we have the Arminian view which has a few variations but here is the basic view. Man is totally fallen in sin and cannot know the truth or believe it apart from God. However, when Jesus died on the cross he gave free will to everyone so that when they heard the gospel they could believe. So that everyone has a part of them unaffected by sin, a free will.

We will see as we examine the Scriptures today that the Bible paints a different picture. Paul in Romans 8 is talking about assurance, he is doing this from various angles. He began in 8:1-4 to show that there is no condemnation on account of what Christ has done, for those who are trusting in Christ. He ended his overview of the Gospel with an emphasis on

God's purpose in saving us, which is that we by the Spirit might fulfil the righteous requirements of the law. We have been spending a few messages emphasizing that God has saved us to make us holy. This holiness that marks the true believer is the inevitable work of the Spirit in every believer. Paul has been contrasting those who are unsaved, that is those who are in the flesh and have minds set upon the flesh; and he has been contrasting them with Christians, those who are in the Spirit and have their minds set upon the things of the Spirit. Holiness is inevitable in those who are Christians, but only sin is possible for those who are not Christian. In other words, the unbeliever cannot help but sin, they cannot be good and they cannot please God. It is here that we pick up Paul's train of thought as he makes four more observations about those who are in the flesh. They are hostile to God, they do not submit to God, they cannot submit to God and they cannot please God. These are all found in Romans 8:7-8, 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.'

The unbeliever is hostile towards God

It is worthwhile stating again that Paul is not comparing believers who have minds that are carnal and believers who are spiritual. Paul is not comparing bad Christians with good Christians and calling bad Christians to stop being fleshly minded and be spiritual minded. Paul does encourage us to according to the Spirit in other places, but that is not what he is doing here. Here Paul is showing why we are able to fulfil God's purpose in saving us, that we should fulfil the righteous requirements of the law; and why the unbeliever cannot do that very thing. Paul points to our two different conditions, being in the flesh or Spirit, the way in which we are controlled by those conditions, our minds are set/fixed/obsessed with the things of the flesh or the Spirit, those in the flesh experience, and will finally also taste death; but those in the Spirit experience and will experience life and peace. Those in the Spirit can fulfil the righteous requirements of the law and please God; but those who are not Christians they cannot, and therefore they have no hope of salvation and have to look to Christ not themselves or the law for salvation. Verse 9-10 makes very clear the way in which Paul is arguing, 'You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.' If you have the Spirit you are in the Spirit, if not you are not a Christian. This proves that Paul is explaining the differences between Christians and unbelievers, not two different types of believers.

Why do I bother to stress that pedantic point? The bible's view of man's sin is a very dark one, and there are many Christians who cannot accept what it says. In my attempts to show them from certain scriptures what the bible teaches about man's inability I have resorted to Romans 8:7-8, however, I have been told that it is not teaching about unbelievers but Christians. And so they continue to believe lies about how affected we are by sin by interpreting these verses wrongly thinking that Paul is talking about the unbeliever and not Christians.

Let us look then at Paul's description of the unbeliever. 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God.' The verse begins with the word 'for' this indicates that Paul is drawing some conclusions based on the verses before it. The thinking goes like this: those who live according to the flesh are obsessed with the flesh because their minds are fixed upon the flesh, why are their minds fixed upon the flesh and sin and not good? Here Paul tells us because they are in themselves biased, bent, in antithesis against and hostile towards God. To get at his meaning let me put it in question form: which comes first and results in the other? Do we begin with fleshly minds that then turn against God; or are we turned against God and therefore are preoccupied with the flesh? Are basically good people and victims of our situations where we have been misled and are trapped in sins and if we just had a clear presentation of God we would gladly forsake sin for Him; or are we by nature turned against God and towards self, and even if you performed miracles in front of us we would find ways to disbelieve because we refuse to acknowledge God's lordship over us? Paul is telling us that our default setting is against God, that we as sinners when we are dead in sin are dead to God, that we are not distracted seekers of God, but rather there is no one who seeks God and everyone is seeking their own wills. We are not neutral we are hostile! It is in our nature to be hostile to God, in Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul continues to paint the dark truth about our position in sin, 'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience--- 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.' We didn't learn to love sin and hate God we have that bias engrained in us.

The unbeliever does not submit to God

Nobody who is an unbeliever does any true obedience to God! I start off with that statement to provoke us into thinking hard about whether an unbeliever can be or do good. Paul shows us the evidence of the unbeliever's bias against God, 'for it (the unbeliever's mind) does not submit to God's law.' This is simply another statement by Paul like another that he made earlier, 3:12, 'All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.' Can you agree with that statement, that there are no good people, that unbelievers are not good people, and they do not do good, they do not fulfil the righteous requirements of the law? Paul in particular says that they do not submit to God's law. Our loyalty to God is established by loyalty and faithfulness to His law.

There may be some who say that they are God's children, or followers of God, that they are seeking God and doing good. Paul says, unless you are a born again disciple of Jesus Christ, for all of the appearance of your religion you are not submitted to the law. It is only those who walk according to the Spirit who can fulfil the law. I want to press this a little more because I find that even Christians are not in full agreement with this point. Let me go deeper with a question, can an unbeliever perform a good deed? I answer, no! However, you might want to argue with me and say, but what about all the charity that is done by unbelievers, the many good deeds done on a daily basis? What about fire fighters, nurses, teachers, doctors, and the many other civil servants who serve the community, are they not

doing good? I continue to answer, no! The reason is found in the key words, submit to God's law. There are many people who do nice things if we compare their actions with other sinners. There certainly are sinners who are nicer and who do fewer bad things than other sinners. This however does not make a person good in God's eyes, just better than other sinners. Some of these nicer people may even be religious and do many nicer things as part of their religion. However, if they are not born again and do not have the new heart of the Spirit, they are not doing it for God but self. Here is an example, I come across many people who choose a life of being nice as better than a life of crime. I have come across people who even say that the ten commandments is a general guide that they attempt to follow. Let us say for arguments sake that a person obeys all 10 of God's laws except the 7th, do not commit adultery, because they are unhappily married and feel they have the right to be happy. So for all appearances they appear to be someone who is good, they may even be better in their general living than a Christian who is born again. However, that one little sin, that one law that they refuse to submit to shows that the only reason they have embraced the others is not because they have unconditionally submitted themselves to God as Lord, but because they see the benefits of a moral life and use God's law to serve their selfish ends. The façade of their goodness is exposed when we see that they are not obeying the law because they love God, but because they find it easy, convenient, beneficial or not at present interfering with what they deem acceptable. James rips the lie apart when he says, For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 11 For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.' (James 2:10-11). There are many people who appear to be submitted to the law, but their partial obedience proves that they are in fact still self-enthroned and not submitted to God but putting on appearances. No unbeliever truly submits to God until his heart is changed by the Spirit of God in the gift of repentance.

The unbeliever cannot submit to God

Most Christians would agree with what we have stated up until now, we are born with a sinful nature, and no one is good. It is the next statement that causes some to stop short of all the bible says about our total inability, 'indeed it (the unbeliever's mind) cannot.' The unbeliever is not someone who has the power and the will not to sin but simply chooses not to, Paul tells us that they cannot choose otherwise. They do not because they cannot, not they cannot because they do not. They have a total inability to love God and submit to Him. It is this truth that has caused Christians to step back from what the Bible teaches about our total inability because it appears to contradict what some have called 'free will.' The reasoning goes like this. God would never command us to do something we could not perform, therefore submitting to God must be a matter of choice and something within our power to perform. It is reasoned that God would be unreasonable to demand something we could not perform. This thinking is wrong in several ways. Firstly, of course God commands things that we cannot perform. God commands us to be holy as He is holy, and perfect as He is perfect. His laws which are right and He cannot demand any less are unchangeable. Adam and Eve could perform these laws when they were unfallen in Eden, but now that we are fallen God's laws have not and cannot be changed to suite our capacities. Secondly, in

affirming the bible's teaching on total inability we are not making human beings into robots. There is a careful distinction that accounts for this apparent problem. Robots cannot do what they want, for they neither want nor have a will, they necessarily need to be programmed. However, we as human beings are free agents, which means that we can do what we want. Both before the fall and after the fall we are still free in this regard. But there is a difference between free will and being a free agent. For having a sinful nature we now want things that are contrary to God and cannot want what God wants. We are still free to choose what we want, but no longer free to choose what we ought. This means that we always sin willingly and freely, but do not have a free will to want what God wants. Adam and Eve were free agents who had a free will to will what God wills; however, after the fall we are free agents who are free to choose what we want, but we are bent away from what God wants to selfish and contrary desires.

Our agency is not impaired by the fall, our nature, heart and desires have been. We are not turned into robots by the fall, but we are turned away from God. And now we are only to free to act according to our natures and choose what we want, but we are fallen in nature and no longer want God. So we are now spiritually impaired and cannot do many things. We are unable to know and agree with spiritual truths, truths like the Gospel, 1 Cor. 2:14, 'The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.' Nicodemus an accomplished teacher of the OT could not even recognise/see that the kingdom of God was present in Christ, John 3:3, 'Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."' We need God to reveal spiritual truth to us, even the truth of Jesus as saviour, Matt. 11:25-27, 'At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.' John 8:47, 'Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.'

Since we are dead in sin and unable to believe in Christ, hate sin, and submit to God, we necessarily need God to take the initiative and draw us to Christ, John 6:44, 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.' The bible reveals that faith and repentance are not abilities that lie dormant in some free will ready to respond to the gospel but gifts from God, Eph. 2:8-9, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.' Phil. 1:29, 'For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.' Some have tried to twist the scripture in Romans that says that all have been given a measure of faith. This however is talking to believers not the whole world we see in 2 Thess. 3:2, that all do not have the gift of faith, 'and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith.' Likewise repentance is said to be a gift and not something natural to our fallen natures, 2 Tim. 2:25, 'correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.' Acts 11:18, 'When they heard

these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Do you agree with Paul that the natural man cannot submit to God and needs God to intervene to save him, to grant him understanding, faith, repentance and resurrection? We do not need to see a miracle to believe there were many in Jesus ministry who did and wouldn't believe. We need a resurrection from the dead, a new heart that will turn to God and, like Lazarus we need God to speak a living word into our lives by the Gospel, for no one can call Jesus Lord apart from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).

Why have I taken the time to prove this teaching this morning? Am I teaching this doctrine because I am addicted to controversy and delight in showing my brothers and sisters in Christ to be wrong? Am I pedantic and want to be seen as smart? I am emphasizing this doctrine to defend the honour of our God. How many of us have told the story of our salvation talking about what good seekers we were and how we found God, which implies that we are better than the unbeliever who hasn't found him? We have glorified ourselves instead of crediting Him with salvation. By showing you how incapable we were of saving ourselves we can now clearly see the grace of God in saving us. We were not 95% of the way there and He gave us the last little shove, no we were dead and He resurrected us. We are not saved based on our own will but based on His mercy, Romans 9:16, 'So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.'

The unbeliever cannot please God

The second reason why I stress these things is to say what Paul has been trying to say along, and he says it again in v8, 'those who are in the flesh cannot please God.' My second purpose is to take away all hope of you ever saving yourself by your own works and goodness so that you will put away all futile efforts of trying to get into heaven by being good enough and trust in Christ for righteousness that can justify. This week I had a Hindu come to me and ask me, 'How do I stop sinning?' I told her two things, firstly, you cant we are sinners and we cannot please God, however in becoming a Christian we begin to make some small progress against sin but will not be perfect until we die. Secondly, if hypothetically you could stop sinning, you still would not have something that pays for your sin debt and you would still need to be judged for all the things you done wrong. I was merely saying what Paul is saying here.

You see in Paul's congregation there would have been some, especially of Jewish origin who would have thought that the law was given by God as a stairway to heaven, a means by which we could exercise our wills, do good deeds and earn our way into heaven. Paul invites us to see the truth that we are sinners who are by default hostile to God, we do not submit to God nor can we. Any attempts to try and please God by keeping the law are doomed to fail. We cannot save ourselves, God must save us. And God has made provision for us, He has sent His Son Jesus Christ to pay the price that our sins have incurred, paying the debt in full so that we do not need to add anything to His payment. If we will forsake our sins and take the gift of this righteousness we will be credited as righteous by God.

Jesus will be seen as our substitute and by His death our sins will be seen as paid for in full. But not only does God justify us, He unites us to Christ and fills us with His Spirit applying the resurrection life of Christ to us and freeing us from the power of sin so that we can now live better lives empowered by His provision. We can now make some small progress in holiness and develop into the likeness of Christ. This is how God saves and makes us holy. We are not saved by our provisions, nor are we made holy by our own provisions, justification is by grace and sanctification is by grace. Justification is by trusting in the provision that God has made for our righteousness in Christ, and sanctification is also a life of faith where we look to God's provisions for us in Christ.