

In Our Desperation Romans 3:9-18

Christmas is soon upon us and we will be celebrating the birth of our Savior – the greatest gift this world has ever known. To try to give some comparison, I think about the awesome miracle of a baby being born and how amazing that gift is – especially to the parents. I think back to when each of our children were born and with all of them I can remember sweet moments when it was all quiet in the hospital room, just me, Amy and the baby – I remember holding our brand new son or daughter and just staring at them with awe and wonder. What an amazing gift! Such an awesome blessing...

My hope is in the next three weeks we will feel those same kinds of feelings and have those same kinds of thoughts as we reflect on the gift of the birth of Jesus. In the midst of all the busyness of this Christmas season I hope we can recapture a sense of wonder at the amazing gift that Jesus is.

One of the ways we can do that is by seeing how desperate and undeserving we were to receive such a gift. I was at a pastor's meeting about a month ago and one of the pastors commented on how amazing it is that in spite of our wickedness and rebellion, God didn't wait for us to come to him; he saw us in our weakness, sin and desperation and came to us. That idea hit me... How amazing is it, that God would do that? What an incredible gift! It's one thing if a friend gives another friend an amazing gift – it's special, but not necessarily surprising. But when someone gives an amazing gift to someone who has made themselves their enemy, now that's spectacular. And that's exactly what God has done for us.

That's what we see in that little baby that we think so much about at Christmas, and this morning I want us to think about that more deeply. I want us to see the desperate condition we were in so we can grasp more fully the wonder of what God did that we celebrate at Christmas.

In the book of Romans, Paul spends the first part of the letter reminding his readers of how desperate their condition was. It didn't matter if they were Jews or Gentiles, all of them had been corrupted by sin. In the middle of chapter 3 he puts together one of the most powerful passages that speaks of our desperation.

Romans 3:9-18

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, ¹⁰ as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. ¹³ Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. ¹⁴ Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. ¹⁵ Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known. ¹⁸ There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

When you hear it all at once, this passage is already very sobering, but looking at it more carefully helps us see our desperation even more. Paul is quoting from the Old Testament in these verses – mostly from the Psalms. He begins quoting from Psalm 14: *“None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”* He’s emphasizing the universal corruption, ignorance, and rebellion of mankind against God. It’s not some of us that have a problem; it’s not most of us; it’s all of us. And it’s not that some of us are worse or better than others, we’re all equally as bad – “together we have become worthless.”

I think it’s helpful to hear exactly what it says in Psalm 14:1-3: *“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good. ² The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. ³ They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.”*

There are not good people and bad people in the human race when it comes to how we’ve treated God – we’re all bad. Were it not for the grace of God in our lives, all of us would be in a wretched, desperate condition. None of us would be righteous. None of us would turn to God or choose to follow him. We would continually stiffen our necks against him and follow our own path. I’m reminded of Isaiah 53:6: *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way.”*

It reminds me of when one of our kids was learning to tie their shoes. Amy worked at teaching each of our kids how to do it and each of them responded a

little different. But one of them sticks out in our memories because when she showed interest in figuring it out, she refused to get any help. Amy tried, but it was denied. She was dead set that she was going to figure it out on her own and do it her own way. And you can imagine how well that went...

There was frustration and anger. There was complaining and screaming and hot tears. It erupted into temper tantrums and eventually she'd throw the shoes aside and give up in disgust. But she wouldn't let Amy help. Even when she screamed and gave up because she just couldn't get it, she refused help. She had to do it her own way – no matter how miserable and desperate she was.

I think that gives us a picture of the desperate condition we were in before God. Even though he created us and wants to lead and guide us through life to experience fullness of joy and purpose, we became like a child who stubbornly chooses to go their own way no matter how miserable they become.

Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1-3: *“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins² 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.”* In writing about godless humanity in Ephesians 4:18-19, Paul says, *“They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”*

Growing up in a culture and in families that have been heavily influenced by Christianity, many of us probably have a hard time imagining how bad we could be. We might be able to imagine how bad other people can be – the really “bad” people – but it's probably hard for most of us to imagine how bad we would be without God's intervention. But it's important for us to realize that these verses describe how desperate our condition would be without God's grace.

Paul goes on in Romans 3, verses 13-18 to explain our universal corruption against other people: *“Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips.¹⁴ Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.*

¹⁵ Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known. ¹⁸ There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

These statements mostly pertain to how terrible people can be toward other people:

- Their throat is an open grave – this means their speech brings death. It curses and crushes people.
- They use their tongues to deceive.
- The venom of asps is under their lips – refers to gossip and slander.
- Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.
- Their feet are swift to shed blood – no hesitation to break God’s laws to bring harm to others
- In their paths are ruin and misery – they leave a wake of destruction and pain
- The way of peace they have not known – they produce division and strife with everyone in their path
- No fear of God before their eyes – they treat other people terribly because they don’t fear God. They refuse to believe in him, thus don’t fear his judgment for their sin.

You hear these things and you think “Yuck!” It’s like there’s just all kinds of filth clinging to humanity that’s rotten and detestable. What misery! What wretchedness! But in order for us to get the full force of these verses, we have to realize this is the depth of the corruption that’s inside us, and this isn’t just describing other people; it’s describing each one of us! This is what each one of us would be without God’s grace, mercy, and plan of redemption. I read a book once by C.S. Lewis that was a depiction of hell and the way he pictured hell was humanity abandoned by God and unrestrained by grace. It was terrible and it sounded a lot like these verses. Humanity left to themselves – to do whatever their corrupt desires wants to do is really, really bad. An ever-descending journey into wretched misery.

Now that we’ve seen how awful humanity can be, we read about something that I hope will take our breath away. John 3:16-17: *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* And Romans 5:6-8: *“For*

while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

In spite of our desperation and depravity, God sent his Son – born as a baby, born to die, born to take away our sins. What a glorious, indescribable gift! May the Lord fill us with awe and wonder as we reflect on his grace and mercy today.