

1. **Introduction**: Apart from salvation “in Christ,” is it possible for anyone to stand “in the right” before God? Paul explored this question. His conclusion is NO! By their own effort, can stand “in the right” before God. Paul then asks this question. Does that statement apply to God’s chosen people, the Jews?
2. **Romans 3:9-11**: *“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, ¹⁰as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹no one understands; no one seeks for God.”*
 - Apart from God’s grace in Christ, all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, are trapped in sin and subject to God’s wrath and final judgment.
 - Psalm 14:1-3; 53:1-3, and Ecclesiastes 7:20 declare *“as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.”*
 - This is a serious charge. It depicts people apart from Christ as being unable to do even one thing to please Him, to understand, or truly seek God.
 - This is a vivid example of what is meant by “total depravity.” Total depravity does not mean being as evil as possible. It means the Fall soiled and degraded every human faculty of every person making them unable to please God.
 - From God’s perspective, who has a righteous moral nature? Paul answers from Scripture, *“none is righteous, no, not one.”*
 - Righteousness suppresses sin. In the absence of righteousness, sin proliferates.
 - Fallen human minds are sinful: *“No one understands; no one seeks for God.”*
 - Paul said in 1 Corinthians 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.”* Apart from Christ, people are unable to understand spiritual things.
 - The fact that no one, apart from Christ, is righteous before God does not mean everyone without Christ is unethical from a human perspective. Being humanly ethical means moral actions are in agreement with an established standard.
 - The “ten commandments,” as a moral standard, are widely known. But even an unbeliever with a desire to deal fairly with other people might unknowingly obey a portion of the Law by deciding to not steal, commit adultery, bear false witness, murder, or covet.

- Such people, when encountered, will appear to be nice and honorable, someone who would make a good friend. But from God’s viewpoint, they have ignored the most important commandment.
- Jesus in Matthew 22 declared that the greatest commandment is ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”*** The second in importance is ***“You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”***
- The Law is a whole. Failing to obey any point of the Law, is disobedience of the whole. Obeying nine commandments, but disobeying one has the same consequences as disobeying all.
- “Common decency” in interpersonal relations can make life on the horizontal level good. But loving God with all your being and acting in accordance with that love is an entirely different thing. Relationships with other people flow from our relationship with God.
- It is not enough to be a “nice person.” As Augustine said, we will be discontent and restless until we find our rest in our creator God. He knows what we need.

3. **A Real Problem and Its Solution:** The fact a fallen nature cannot understand spiritual things is a real problem. Failing to recognize a spiritual component in the universe, leads to the disastrous belief that they only physical things exist.

- Why can’t a person’s fallen nature understand spiritual things? Because of constraints imposed by the Fall on the human ability to make decisions.
- Can the problem be fixed? Yes, but a fix requires a transformation of being which only God can do. The underlying problem arises from being “spiritually dead in trespasses and sin.”
- God is able and willing to restore spiritual life and accomplish the necessary transformation of being. He requires you believe in Him and the solution He provides through Christ.

4. **Some Important Questions:** In Ephesians 2:1 Paul says, people are ***“dead in trespasses and sins.”*** Does he truly mean people are unable to respond to God in any way? Think about it. Then consider,

- What did Jesus mean by John 6:37, ³⁷ ***“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”*** In John 6:39, ***“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he***

has given me, but raise it up on the last day.” In John 6:44, *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”* In John 6:65, *“This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”*

- Many people reasonably ask how can a person be held accountable for failing to believe in Jesus if they are not drawn by the Father? Can a person “drawn by the Father” reject Jesus?
- How do Jesus’ statements relate to a person’s “free will?”
- How do they relate to the free offer of the gospel in other Scripture passages?
- For example, in Isaiah 55:1, *“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!”*
- As we learned in verse 2:11, God judges impartially basing His judgment of a person on the knowledge they have, not on knowledge they don’t have.
- When a person decides to take action, what is involved? What is involved in a person deciding to seek salvation from Christ?

5. **What is Involved in Making a Choice:** Understanding the details of how people make decisions is difficult.

- Somehow, when a choice is to be made, a person’s mind inclines toward one possibility rather than alternates.
- Some choices involve moral considerations, others are morally neutral. Many will involve both moral and morally neutral issues.
- Moral choices are concerned with principles of right and wrong.
- True principles of moral behavior came from God, but everyone has rules they attempt to follow in making moral choices.
- Following moral principles doesn’t necessarily mean following God.
- The Pharisees sought salvation by scrupulously following their moral precepts. They knew nothing of salvation by grace. Seeking salvation by following rules is doomed to fail.

6. **Jonathan Edwards’ View of Decision Making:** Understanding how decisions are made was studied by Edwards and reported in his book, **“A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will”** (1754).

- No earlier contributor had bothered to define the “will,” but Edwards did.
- Before Edwards, the will was generally considered to be an independent faculty.

- Edwards disagreed. He defined the will as *“that by which the mind chooses anything.”* In other words willful choice utilizes the whole mind.
- Memory, attitudes, knowledge, emotions and sensory input all impact choice. If you doubt this, think about decisions made under torture.
- Every “choice” is an effect (a result) that must have a cause.
- Edwards believed the cause of a choice was a motive-driven inclination.
- The faculties of the mind produce a variety of inclinations. Inclinations are then “weighed” by the will, the will functioning like a balance scale. The strongest inclination at the instant of decision determines the choice.
- Many inclinations are involved, each compared to other possibilities.
- The time available for making a decision can vary from almost zero to years.
- Every choice, when made, is exactly what a person desires at the instant of choice. For that reason we are accountable for our choices.

7. **Natural and Moral Ability to Choose:** Edwards called having the necessary faculties of mind to make a decision “natural ability.”

- Making wise choices also requires knowledge about the area of choice.
- This is particularly true where moral issues must be decided.
- Ability to make good moral decisions requires submission to a standard for judging right and wrong.
- The particular moral standard chosen is vital, critical in determining character.
- If people have the natural ability to make decisions, why won’t all fallen people seek God and come to Christ for salvation?
- The problem isn’t a lack of “natural ability” to make choices. The Fall did not eliminate the natural ability to choose. The great disaster of the Fall was the degradation of moral nature by the loss of holiness.
- Unregenerate people can intellectually understand the law of God and its obligations. They can also intellectually understand the content of the gospel.
- What they lack is moral inclination toward God. If they wanted to, they could decide to seek God. But they don’t want to. Moral inclination toward God can only come from God and only received by a spiritually alive person.

8. **Free-will and Choosing to Seek God:** All people have natural ability to make choices. Choices are driven by knowledge and suppositions.

- Righteous moral choices require moral understanding and right moral attitudes.
- Choosing God is a moral choice requiring spiritual discernment.
- Is the human “decision-making” apparatus free to make any choice at any time independent of what the type of decision.
- Why does Paul say, “*no one understands; no one seeks for God?*” He is speaking of spiritually dead people.
- Questions about human ability to seek God have been argued repeatedly.
- In the early 400’s Augustine (Bishop of Hippo in North Africa) and Pelagius (a Celtic Monk who moved from Britain to Rome, to Carthage, to Jerusalem).
- Pelagius did not believe in original sin. He believed sin was only those deliberate, unrelated acts in which the will actually chooses to be evil.
- He thought the will was neutral and always free to choose either good or evil.
- The problem with that is when sinners hear the Gospel, whether or not they are saved depends only on their will choosing to receive or to reject the Savior, independent of all other factors.
- Augustine declared the view of Pelagius to be unbiblical. He said the Bible speaks, not only of individual acts of sin, but also of a sin nature. People inherit a depravity that makes it impossible for an individual to stop sinning.
- Augustine said people’s choices are always in agreement with their inclinations.
- Without God’s intervention, Augustine says a person is “**not able to not sin.**” In their own power fallen people cannot stop sinning and turn to God. Many sins flow from selfishness, covetousness, and lust.
- Augustine said that having abused their moral free-will in sinning, Adam and Eve and their progeny lost that moral free-will.
- Augustine said human moral will is free from righteousness, but enslaved to sin. The will is free to turn from God, but not to come to God.
- Apart from God’s grace, no one can be saved. Ephesians.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.*”
- Remember Jesus’ statement about the necessity of being drawn by the Father. That is part of God’s great gift.
- Augustine won the argument with Pelagius, but the church gradually drifted back toward Pelagianism in the middle ages.

9. **Free-Will Again:** “Free-will” arguments erupted again in the reformation. First, Luther versus Erasmus and later Calvin’s followers versus those of Arminius.
- Erasmus challenged Luther’s view that intervention by God is necessary.
 - Luther viewed the issue of “ability to choose” as vital, but Erasmus considered it relatively unimportant. Luther explained his view in “**The Bondage of the Will**” (1525).
 - Luther acknowledged people’s natural ability make choices, but denied the possibility of human choice in the specific area of choosing or rejecting God.
 - He reasoned that, because of the Fall, human wills are enslaved to sin.
 - Calvin’s and Arminius’s followers held opposite views on the ability of the natural human will to choose Christ. In 1610 (Arminius died in 1609) followers of Arminius wrote the “5 Articles of Remonstrance. In 1618 at the Synod of Dort, followers of Calvin (died 1574) presented the “5 Points of Calvinism.”
 - The Calvinist position was that choosing God requires God’s intervention.
10. **Moral Ability to Seek God:** The Fall did not affect natural ability to make decisions. But it did affect ability to make moral decisions, particularly to seek God. Paul says because of the Fall, people’s spiritual faculty is “*dead in trespasses and sin*” (Ephesians 2:1).
- 1 Corinthians 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.*”
 - Remember, Jesus said, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. . . .*” (John 6:44). The Father must draw a person to Christ to enable them to make the moral decision to choose to follow Christ.
 - Moral ability to choose Christ comes from God as a gift to those He chooses.
 - In drawing people to Jesus, the Father’s first action is “regeneration,” giving them new spiritual life.
 - Fallen people may admire Jesus and be impressed by His moral teaching, but apart from God’s divine initiative, no one will come to Christ and be saved.
 - Sinners will not come to Christ, not because they can’t, but because they don’t want to. They don’t want too because they are spiritually dead.
 - There is no natural mental or physical hindrance to seeking God. The problem is spiritual. Anyone who wants to come to Christ **may** come. Edwards insisted

the will has liberty, or the freedom to choose according to one's strongest desire, but the natural man does not desire God.

- The liberty to choose Christ makes refusal unreasonable and increases guilt. People lack desire to seek God not the ability to choose Him.
- Godly inclinations should come from people's spiritual faculty, but Paul says fallen people's spiritual faculty is "***dead in trespasses and sin***" (Ephesians 2:1).
- Given this situation, who chooses to come? No one, except those in whom the Holy Spirit has already performed the entirely irresistible work of new birth.
- The result of this miracle is the opening of the spiritually blind eyes of the heart to see God's truth. The regenerated sinner desires to embrace Christ as Savior.

11. Romans 3:10b-12:^{10b} "*None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹²All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.*"

- Paul says, "***No one understands no one seeks for God; all have turned aside.***"
- People's minds are sinful, lacking understanding of God. People have no desire for God and will not seek Him through their natural decision-making ability.
- Paul says, "***No one understands no one seeks for God; all have turned aside.***"
- People's minds are sinful, lacking understanding of God. People have no desire for God and will not seek Him through their natural decision-making ability.
- There is a "right way" to approach God, but people have turned from that right way and either don't seek Him at all, or look for Him in wrong ways.
- The right way to approach God is to recognize His grace, eternal power, and divine nature. Come to Him bringing nothing, accept Him and His offer of salvation. Then glorify, thank, worship, and serve him.
- The Pharisees sought salvation by obedience to rules. Many today follow the same path. But that way fails. The only possible way is by the grace of God.
- Not only do people fail to follow God's way, but they choose to follow their own way as they bow to **self**. Much (perhaps most) sin flows from selfishness, covetousness, and lust.
- The only possibility of getting back on the "right way" is through the salvation earned by Christ and offered freely by God's grace to those who believe.

12. Romans 3:13- 18: 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.”*

- This is a description of humanity in ruins.
- In chapter 1 Paul gave his own grim description of humanity derived from the depravity he saw in first-hand experience of people around him.
- He described humanity as filled with all kinds of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity, full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful. They invent ways of doing evil, disobey their parents, are senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.
- The difference between chapter 1 and these verses is each sentence here is a quote from the Old Testament. What we have is not Paul’s opinion, but God’s statement that people apart from Christ are depraved.
- It is a frightening description. God indicts every member of the human race who stands apart from Christ as being ungodly and unmoral.
- It is striking that each quote in verse 13 refers to speech organs.
- Paul is pointing out that people’s words can do terrible harm.
- Venomous, deceitful words, as well as curses and bitterness, have deadly effects on human personalities.
- Perhaps the most sinful use of human speech is false teaching about God and His salvation. *“They use their tongues to deceive”* applies to many situations but certainly applies to teaching deceptive doctrine.
- Isaiah reminds us that, apart from Christ, we often yearn to hear pleasing but false doctrine. He gives an example from Isaiah 30:10b, *“Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions.”*
- Smooth doctrine is easy to listen to but extremely dangerous to spiritual health.
- From deceptive smooth, but untrue, speech it is but a short step to curses, bitterness, and blasphemy.
- Human wickedness seldom stops with mere words.
- Apart from Christ, people do not know the way of peace, their way is a way of ruin and misery both to themselves and to others.

- Such people tend to turn to violence and the shedding of blood if there is no other convenient way to achieve their goals.
- Paul states the ultimate source of all sin in verse 18 – ***“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”***
- The word “fear” in this context is not common meaning of “fright” or “terror.” To “fear” God means having a right and reverential attitude before Him.
- It means worshipping God, being obedient to Him, and turning aside from evil.
- John Calvin said about these verses that *“all wickedness flows from a disregard of God. When we have forsaken the fear of God, which is the essential part of wisdom, there is no right or purity left. In short, since the fear of God is the bridle by which our wickedness is held back, its removal frees us to indulge in every kind of licentious conduct.”*

13. **What is Next: Romans 3:19-20.**