

Lecture 5- Biblical View on Human Depravity and Free will; What About Preventive Grace?

Biblical Portrait of Human Depravity (sinfulness)

- Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that **every** intent of the thoughts of his heart was **only** evil **continually** [literally, “**all** the day”]. (Gen. 6:5 NASB)
- The LORD smelled the soothing aroma; and the LORD said to Himself, "I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the **intent of man's heart is evil from his youth**; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done. (Gen. 8:21 NASB)
- Look, I was **guilty of sin from birth, a sinner** the moment my mother conceived me. (Ps. 51:5 NET)
- Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and who never sins. (Eccl. 7:20 NASB)
- This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are **full of evil** and insanity is in their hearts **throughout their lives**. Afterwards they *go* to the dead. (Eccl. 9:3 NASB)
- "When they sin against You (for **there is no man who does not sin**) and You are angry with them and deliver them to an enemy, so that they take them away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near; (1 Ki. 8:46 NASB)
The human mind [lit. “heart”] is more deceitful than anything else. It is **incurably** bad. Who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9 NET)
- ¹⁰just as it is written: "There is no one righteous, **not even one**, ¹¹ there is **no one who understands**, there is **no one who seeks God**. ¹² **All** have turned away, **together** they have become worthless; there is **no one** who shows kindness, **not even one**." ¹³ "Their throats are open graves, they deceive with their tongues, the poison of asps is under their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood, ¹⁶ ruin and misery are in their paths, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known." ¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Rom. 3:10-18 NET)
- ¹⁷So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, ¹⁸ being darkened in their understanding, **excluded from the life of God** because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; ¹⁹ and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. (Eph. 4:17-18 NASB)
- For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, **enslaved** to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. (Tit. 3:3 NASB)
- ⁵For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, ⁷ because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is **not even able to do so**, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh **cannot** please God. (Rom. 8:5-8 NASB)
- But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he **cannot** understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. (1 Cor. 2:14 NASB)
- And you were **dead** in your trespasses and sins, ² in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. ³ Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were **by nature children of wrath, even as the rest**. (Eph. 2:1 NASB)

Summary of Contrasting Views on Original Sin and Grace

	Original Sin	Grace	Free Will	Election	Salvation	Examples
Pelagianism Circa 400 A.D. <small>Condemned as heresy Carthage (418) Ephesus (431)</small>	Man is born innocent. Adam's sin affected only himself	No special grace needed	Yes	None	Human monergism: man initiates his own salvation	Charles Finney Modern Theological Liberal Movement
Semi-Pelagianism	Man is born spiritually weak. No imputation of Adam's sin/guilt	Man cooperates with God's grace	Yes	Conditional upon exercising faith out of their free will	Synergism: God and man cooperate	Dave Hunt Norm Geisler Roman Catholicism
Arminianism	Total depravity (?) (sometimes labeled as deprivation) and total inability (hypothetical). Imputation of Adam's sin/guilt usually denied Deut 24:16	Prevenient grace leads to cooperation Given at birth	Yes: as a result of God's prevenient grace given universally to all mankind (at birth?) depends on specific theologian	Conditional upon exercising faith out of their free will which was restored through prevenient grace.	Synergism: God and man cooperate	Methodists Wesleyans (Some Lutherans) Pentecostals Charismatics "Free Will Baptists" Some evangelicals
Calvinism <small>This chart has been modified from the original by Dr. William Combs in his article, "Does the Bible Teach Prevenient Grace?"</small>	Total depravity and total inability. Imputation of Adam's sin/guilt results in sin nature and penalty of death at conception	Efficacious grace will overcome man's resistance and effectively persuade them to demonstrate faith as an effect of regeneration.	Limited Free will: only to follow his own nature	Unconditional Based on God's sovereign choice and not based on any foreseen faith choice	Divine monergism: God alone saves; man responds after God takes initiative in regenerating a spiritually dead sinner.	Presbyterians (generally) Reformed churches Reformed Baptists

Free Will Affected From Pre-Fall to Post-Fall

Pre-Fall (Gen 1-2)	Post-Fall (natural man) (After Genesis 3)	Post-Conversion (regeneration, new heart) Jer 32:40; Ezek 36:25-27	Post-Glorification (new sinless bodies) Post Resurrection
Ability to not sin Ability to sin	Lost ability to not sin Ability to sin (enslaved to sin)	Ability to not sin regained Ability to sin still retained but no longer enslaved	Ability to not sin No long able to sin (made like God)
	Arminians claim prevenient grace overcomes this fall into inability	Calvinism claims regeneration before faith (1 John 5:1; cf. Prov 21:1) Arminianism opposite	

What About Prevenient (preceding) Grace?

The word *prevenient* comes from the Latin verb *praevenio* (meaning to “come before”). The old English word *prevent* comes from the Latin and means “preceding”. Prevenient grace in Arminian theology has a wide range. It can be seen almost as anything of kindness that God gives to mankind (food, water, talents, virtues, etc.), but mostly it is in reference to how this grace restores man’s freedom lost in the fall to choose God out of their own free will. This grace removes the inability to choose God on their own (which was the inherited in the sin nature from Adam).

Most Arminian scholars acknowledge that there is no explicit Biblical evidence for prevenient grace. William Combs writes concerning a well known Arminian theologian, “Even Clark Pinnock, who wished to accept prevenient grace in order to avoid Calvinism as the logical result of a soteriology that begins with total depravity, admits that he was forced to give up on the idea because ‘the Bible has no developed doctrine of universal prevenient grace’”. As we analyze the Bible and Arminian arguments, we realize that prevenient grace is asserted through inferences in the Bible and the Theology of God’s nature. Roger Olson, who wrote the book, *Against Calvinism*, explains prevenient grace in these ways:

- If anyone comes to Christ with repentance and faith, it is only because they are enabled by God’s “prevenient grace” to do so. (p. 66)
- Classical Arminian theology . . . attributes the sinners’ ability to respond to the gospel with repentance and faith to prevenient grace. (p. 67)
- [Prevenient grace is] the illuminating, convicting, calling, enabling power of the Holy Spirit working on the sinner’s soul and making them free to choose saving grace (or reject it). (p. 67)
- [Wesley] affirmed original sin, including total depravity in the sense of spiritual helplessness. But he also affirmed God’s universal gift of prevenient or enabling grace that restores freedom of the will. (p. 129)
- Arminianism has always insisted that the initiative in salvation is God’s; it is called “prevenient grace,” and it is enabling but resistible. (p. 169)
- So in Arminian theology, **a partial regeneration does precede conversion, but it is not a complete regeneration**. It is an awakening and enabling, but not an irresistible force. . . . [Prevenient grace is] God’s powerful attracting and persuading power that actually imparts free will to be saved or not. (p. 171)

This list below outlines the various “Biblical evidences” for prevenient grace in the Bible and theology as espoused by various Arminian proponents.

1. *There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.* (**John 1:9** NASB).

A. General revelation? Most likely not.

B. First, inner illumination that leads to conversion given to all peoples, but it does not refer to every last human being “without exception” but to all people groups “without distinction”. If this is the proper interpretation it is consistent with John’s theology in presenting Jesus as the Savior of not just the Jewish people, but all people groups of the world in fulfillment of Genesis 12:3 where God tells Abraham, “In you [and your descendant] all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Notice the consistency of the theology of John in the gospel of John, 1 John, and the book of Revelation focusing on the fact that Jesus was Savior beyond the Jewish people and of all people groups.

The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the **world!** (Jn. 1:29 NASB)

“For God so loved the **world**, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. (Jn. 3:16 NASB)

and they were saying to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the **world.**” (Jn. 4:42 NASB)

“I have other sheep, **which are not of this fold**; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock *with* one shepherd. (Jn. 10:16 NASB)

⁴⁹But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, ⁵⁰ nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.” ⁵¹ Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God **who are scattered abroad.** (Jn. 11:49-52 NASB)

and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and **not for ours only**, but also for *those of* the **whole world.** (1 Jn. 2:2 NASB)
After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from **every nation** and *all tribes* and

peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches *were* in their hands; (Rev. 7:9 NASB)

Secondly, if this is prevenient grace in John 1:9 in the Arminian system, then why does Paul teach 20+ years later that mankind is still inherently, naturally, and universally sinful and unable to seek God (Rom 3:10-18; Eph 2:1-3)?

C. Comparing with John 3:19-21, the light that Jesus brings is one of exposure. His light reveals that our deeds are wicked. His very light and existence is a point of contention (Matt 10:34 – “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword”). Notice the similarity in language. “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil” (John 3:19 NASB). Therefore, this light is not prevenient grace as is suggested by some, but another demonstration of the gap between the pure light of Christ and man’s fallenness. Additionally, this doesn’t help OT saints which would not have had prevenient grace until Jesus came into the world as “the light”.

2. Jesus’ death on the cross and the providing of atonement for humanity is the instrument of prevenient grace in the world. Unfortunately, there is no direct Scripture provided for this assertion. It is inferred from Arminian Theology.

3. “*And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to Myself.*” (**John 12:32** NASB).

A. The context is 12:20-33 where the Greeks (gentiles) are seeking access to Jesus. Jesus ignores their request and gives a teaching on how his death will bear much fruit (like a seed that is planted in the ground). He then makes the comment about His death drawing all to Himself. The context is clear that Jesus, and John in his theological presentation, are demonstrating that Jesus’ death on the cross is for all peoples and not just the Jews only (see 1B above for verses).

B. Seeing in this verse and time frame of Jesus being lifted up on the cross as being the occasion that prevenient grace is implemented is problematic for similar reasons as John 1:9. If this is the case, then prevenient grace was not available for the OT saints until Jesus was crucified.

C. Thirdly, it is abundantly clear that the “drawing” spoken of in John 6:44 (especially when harmonized with the teaching of 6:35-37, 45, 65) is selective to individuals that were given to Christ from the Father and is effectual in the drawing all the way to final salvation. There are no exceptions. All that the Father draws to the Son will be raised up. It is not mere potential salvation, but actual salvation. Additionally, with the broader motifs we have seen in 1B above, the individuals selected for this drawing are and will be from all peoples and family groups of the world and not just the Jews only.

4. **Titus 2:11**- There are two ways this verse is translated in the various English editions. The Young’s Literal translation taken from the later Byzantine textual tradition (Textus Receptus) reads, “For the saving grace of God was manifested to all men” (also KJV). The NASB reads, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.” The question from the text is, “What exactly was manifested/appearing to ALL mankind?” Was it saving grace or salvation? The answer is extremely important. Arminian exegesis has an interest in seeing that it was [prevenient] grace that has appeared to all men. The predominant scholarship and commentary on this passage recognizes two things: 1) The translation of the KJV based on the Textus Receptus has an inferior textual history and does not represent the earliest witnesses to the NT manuscripts. 2) Regardless whether a person agrees with the first reason, scholar E.K. Simpson has shown conclusively that the word “saving” in the Greek dative case is functioning as a classic idiom meaning “bringing salvation to”. What this shows in this text is that it is not [prevenient] grace that has appeared to all mankind, but instead through God’s grace, salvation is being offered to all peoples and not just the Jews. This is consistent with what we have already seen. Finally, even if we were to interpret the passage based on the KJV or YLT (Greek Textus Receptus), there is nothing explicit in the text that this grace has removed the inability of the sin nature that all humanity has inherited from Adam. Nor does it make any statements at all that man’s free will has been restored. This is simply reading into the text a theology that is not exegetically supported.

5. How could a loving and just God command mankind to repent when they lack the ability (Acts 17:30)? This is a human logical construct that assumes we have the full understanding of how God interacts with humanity. In reality, we should recognize that God does indeed command mankind to repent and as we have seen, and in some sense man lacks moral ability, but is still held accountable. Scripture is the final authority, not human rational deductions that lack all the necessary data to make a determination. Some scholars and theologians (like Jonathan Edwards) feel that this is not a difficult problem when we understand that God doesn’t hold us accountable for natural inability, but it is right and just to hold us accountable even in our moral inability. See his book, *Freedom of the Will* for more information.

How do the implications of Prevenient Grace interact with the more explicit Biblical witness?

Each person will find the various Biblical passages above compelling or not persuasive as they do their own research. However, as was noted by William Combs above, even the most ardent promoters of an Arminian system of soteriology admit that there is no “developed doctrine of universal prevenient grace”. For the sake argument, let’s assume that provenience grace is true. What are the other implications and how does it agree/disagree with other Scripture?

1. When all things are equal and according to prevenient grace, God gives this grace equally to all people universally, who or what is the ultimate deciding factor for how a person comes into a right relationship with Jesus? As much as the Arminian system doesn’t want to use this language, the ultimate deciding factor is the free will of the person himself. Therefore, the thing that separates believers and unbelievers is not God’s will, but their will. Yes, God’s will to give grace starts the work, but the person is still capable of resisting God’s grace. The final and ultimate decision maker is man, not God. Consider these verses:
 - So then it *does not depend* on the man who **wills** or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. (Rom. 9:16 NASB)
 - So then, it does not depend on human desire or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. (9:16 NET)
 - In the exercise of **His will** He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. (James 1:18 NASB)
 - By his sovereign plan he gave us birth through the message of truth, that we would be a kind of first fruits of all he created. (James 1:18 NET)
 - ¹²But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name, ¹³ who were born, not of blood **nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man**, but of God. (John 1:12-13 NASB)
2. Roger Olson was quoted above that prevenient grace was a “partial regeneration”. This is problematic in that there is no Biblical evidence to show a partial regeneration. How would this even work? Using Jesus’ analogy in John 3:3-5, all people are born physically, but believers are born again from above. There is simply no evidence for a partial new birth (regeneration).

⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, **made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)**, ⁶ and **raised us up with Him**, and **seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus**, ⁷ so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 2:4-7 NASB)

²⁶For consider your **calling**, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; ²⁷ but God has **chosen** the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has **chosen** the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the despised God has **chosen**, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so **that no man may boast before God**. ³⁰ **But by His doing you** are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, ³¹ so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD." (1 Cor. 1:26-31 NASB)