

Why is Humanity Beautiful and Horrible?

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[0 : 00] Well, today we're continuing our study in Romans. On Sunday mornings, we are looking through this great letter that Paul wrote.

And we've come to the section which Colin read for us from chapter 7. And we're going to look at this section broadly, but I'll just read again verses 18 and 19. Paul says, For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.

For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

I want to start today with the quotation that's on your service sheet from Francis Schaefer. He says, Why is man so wonderful and yet so flawed?

Why can man do these things that make him so unique and yet why is man so horrible? I think that's a really perceptive comment because isn't that true?

[1 : 00] You look at the world around us today and we can see so many precious, wonderful and remarkable aspects of humanity. And yet at the very same time, you see hideous brutality and cruel wickedness in the very same humanity.

And you think about your own life. If you were to ask the question, what are the greatest, happiest, most precious moments of your life? They have probably come through what others have done for you in a relationship to a fellow human.

That's where the greatest moments of joy come in our lives. But if I also asked you, where did the deepest moments of hurt come from in your life?

It's probably from what other people have done to you as well. Why is humanity like that? Why is humanity so beautiful and yet so horrible?

Well, people have tried to answer that question for a long time and some have proposed a solution which says, well, humanity is not really horrible. And so that approach would suggest that humanity is really basically good and on the whole we're getting better.

[2 : 12] And if we just keep on looking within ourselves and striving, then the bad stuff will eventually go away. And that sounds great. And the only problem is that the evidence just doesn't agree.

You look at the world today, it's not fixed, is it? It's not even close. So we can't really use that approach. Other people have taken the opposite opinion and they've said, well, humanity is not really beautiful.

And so things like beauty and love and joy that we value, they're not actually really at the core of who we are, because really we're just a piece of a machine.

And on the basis of that closed machine that we're stuck in, brutality is just inevitable. And there's nothing to really prove that it's horrible.

Is that really the truth? Well, nobody on planet Earth really lives as though that was the case. Every instinct that we have, every study of civilized history that I'm aware of, every piece of evidence that we can observe in the world around us today tells us that humanity is beautiful and horrible.

[3 : 30] And only the Bible tells us why. And this is one of the key issues that lies behind this section in Romans. Paul is talking about humanity and he's talking about why there's something wrong.

Now, I want us to look at this together today, but I think in order to understand what Paul is saying in this passage, we're going to have to take a wee bit of a step back and look at the big picture of what the Bible teaches about humanity.

Always remember that whenever you read a passage of the Bible, whether it's Romans or Jeremiah or whatever it is, that's part of the overall message that runs from the very beginning of Genesis at

the start of the Bible to the very end of Revelation.

The whole thing fits together and I think we need to take that step back and think about the big picture for a wee minute together. Because when the Bible talks about humanity, if we observe the whole of the teaching of Scripture, we can say that the Bible divides the story of humanity into four stages.

Older times may be called that a fourfold state of humanity. We can just say four stages. So, we picture there just to give you the idea. Stage one, created and beautiful.

[4 : 41] Stage two, fallen and broken. Stage three, saved and recovering. Stage four, restored and beautiful again. Now, on the diagram, there's a wee symbol between each box.

I'm not going to tell you what that symbol is yet. Every engineer in here will know what that symbol is, but I will fill the rest of you in later on. Paul's addressing the issue of what's wrong with humanity. He's pointing us to these stages.

He's particularly focused on stage two and stage three. Now, in each of these stages, human experience is made up of two factors. So, we have a governing principle, we can call it, and then our human nature.

And hopefully we'll become a little bit clearer what we mean by that. The idea of an overarching principle that lies at the core of who we are and then a practical outworking of that in our human nature, the way we think, the way we speak, the way we act, our desires, our conduct, all of these things.

Now, that applies. These two things apply at each stage. You can see it there. And both of these things, particularly the governing principle, are related to God's law.

[5 : 50] Now, when we read Romans 7, you heard that word again and again and again, law, law, law, law, law. And so we need to keep it in our minds as we think because God's law has got a really important role in all of this as well.

So, stage one, we are created beautiful. I should warn you now, I love stickmen. So, we'll see stickmen quite often on these screens. Here, we have a harmony in humanity. So, the governing principle is good.

When we were created, originally in the beginning of the Bible, the beginning of the history of humanity, we lived in harmony with God. So, we were governed by God's principles.

God is our Creator and our human nature as a result was good. In other words, we thought and we behaved the way God intended us to. We were made in the image of God, made to be like Him, made to live for Him.

And always remember that humanity has been created by God to live. And death is always an unwanted intrusion in the history of humanity. Death is an enemy. God's purpose for us was to have life.

[6 : 58] And so, we were created beautiful, ready to live for Him. And at this stage, humanity's relationship to God's law is good. God's law functions as our guide and our security.

It's to keep humanity from harm. So, when Adam and Eve were created at the beginning of the Bible, God gave them specific instructions, not to hurt them, but to keep them safe. And of course, that's what all good laws are there for. All good laws are there to keep things good, aren't they? Good laws in our nation are there to keep things good, not to make things worse. So, when God created us, humanity was beautiful. However, sin has brought humanity into stage two, which we could call fallen and broken.

Our first parents, Adam and Eve, sinned against God. The relationship they had with God was broken. And the condition that they enjoyed was ruined. Now, in this stage, two crucial things have happened.

The governing principle, which is symbolized by the wittic on your diagram there, that's changed.

We're no longer under God's governance. Humanity is now under the grip of sin.

[8 : 09] And as a result of that, human nature has become fully infected with an unwanted condition. You may read, if you read a theology book, you might read people call that total depravity.

It just means fully infected with sin. Now, it's important to recognize that that does not mean that we are as evil as we could possibly be. We are infected with a disease. We are not the disease itself. The key point is that it's affected every part of our being. So, sin's effect on us is not partial. It's total. In mind, in body, in desire, in every area, sin has mucked us up.

Something horrible has come into us. But yet, at the same time, humanity is still beautiful, because we still bear the image of God, but it's in a way that's been undermined by sin.

C.S. Lewis described it brilliantly. He said that humanity is a glorious ruin. And I think that sums it up really well. Every part of our life has been affected by sin.

[9 : 19] Humanity has fallen and broken. And we can show that on our diagram. So, the principle at the core of our being changes. So instead of being in harmony with God, we're in rebellion against God.

So that governing principle has changed. The Red Cross means bad. Yeah, just so I'm sure you guessed that. That then has an effect on our human nature.

Our nature becomes fully infected with sin. So our thoughts, our senses, our outward conduct, our actions, the beautiful is being overtaken by the horrible.

Now, the Bible recognizes that beauty is still there. If you go back to Romans chapter 2, Paul talks about that. He'll say that even people who don't know God's law, so the people who weren't part of the Jewish nation and didn't have the Ten Commandments, they still have God's law written on their hearts, and they can still by nature do things that God's law requires.

There's still that element of beauty there. The imprint of God's law is still within us to an extent people still have a sense of morality and a quality of character that corresponds to what the Bible asks of us.

[10 : 34] The beautiful aspect of humanity is still visible, but it's now tangled up with a horrible disease called sin, which is in rebellion against God and His ways.

And that rebellion against God follows a pattern. Sin manifests itself, first of all, in the core of our being, and then it works its way out to our outward actions.

And Paul speaks about this in chapter 1 of Romans. He says that people claiming to be wise, they became fools. They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

That's just summarizing the rejection of God that has taken place. And he says, therefore, God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts, in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies amongst themselves.

And there's a pattern emerging in that last sentence, lusts of their hearts. What we think, what we want, then shapes our bodies. What we do are outward actions.

[11 : 41] All of this arises from abandoning God. As Paul says there, we've rejected the Creator and we worship the creature instead. So we're rebelling against God, we're turning away from him.

Sin has had a total effect. And that means that there's a sense in which there's a harmony among those who rebel against God. Because the governing principle within us is against God.

That leads to desires that are contrary to God's law. That corresponds to actions that are against God's commands. The whole of humanity is in rebellion against God. And this explains an important phenomenon that we observe around us.

It explains why people think that sin is the right thing to do. Now isn't that interesting? The beautiful is being hijacked by the horrible.

And yet people think it's right? There's not many people in the world, I don't think, who wake up every morning and think, I want to be bad.

[12 : 46] But instead, I think the majority of people with no thought of God in their lives, and there are a lot of them around us in Scotland today, they oppose God's ways and yet they think they're doing the right thing.

Because what they feel deep down shapes the way they think and the way they act, and it's all against what God wants. That's why we have people who are quite careless and reckless in their relations with other people, and yet they do it in the name of love.

That's why you see a society that is merciless in humiliating people, and yet it's all in the name of public interest.

That's why you see ruthless exploitation of the poor, and yet it's all in the name of fair competition. And so awful things are actually seen as the right things.

And that's because there's a harmony between the governing principle within them and the words and actions they express in their body. Inwardly, they're not in agreement with God, outwardly, they're not in agreement with God.

[14:00] Humanity is in a state of rebellion against God. And so God all touches on this. He says, though they know God's righteous decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die. They not only do them, but they give approval to those who practice them.

So not only do we do awful things, we say that awful things are right. All of this manifests itself in a humanity that believes that what we want determines what we believe is right.

Now that's the great sociological force that's shaping the world today. If you really want something, then it's the right thing to do. That's why longstanding laws are being changed, because people want things.

We're seeing it all around us. The fascinating thing is that the sociological forces of 2018 were predicted 2,000 years ago in the letter to the Romans. Paul's making it very clear that if we rebel against God, he will leave us to follow our own desires, and these desires will shape our actions. And the point I want to emphasize in all of this is the fact that the person who is in stage 2 is in what we could call a harmonious rebellion against God. That's why you've got the red core and the red nature, if you like.

[15:16] They want to disobey God, therefore what they actually do is disobey God. The whole governing principle of their lives is drawn to sin, and the rest of their nature follows accordingly. Now, we have to stop and ask the question, how did this happen?

What went wrong? Well, at the heart of the whole thing is God's law. That's why if you look at verse 7, Paul says, is God's law the problem?

Because God's law is at the heart of all of this taking place. Paul says, is this the law's fault? Now, Paul's answer to that is no way, and he explains why.

But you can see why he's saying that, because our first parents had a good relationship with the law. God had given them these wonderful privileges. The law was there to keep everything good, but Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the fruit that they were told not to.

And he said, how did that happen? Well, the reason that happened was because the devil came and twisted God's law. So God had given a life-giving commandment to Adam and Eve.

[16:28] The devil came and twisted that commandment and brought humanity into the realm of sin. And that's what the realm of sin does. It abuses God's law in order to hurt us, in fact, in order to kill us.

That's what the devil did to Eve. He twisted the law of God, and he abused it as a means of killing Eve. And now we are all under that same governing principle, and the same thing has affected us. Instead of God's law being brilliant for us, it's now a massive problem. It's now a massive problem. And Paul talks about that in the passage that we read in Romans 7. He says, is the law the problem? He says, no. But he says, the law does do certain things. And he highlights three things that it does.

I won't read that through, but just so it's there so you can pick out why I'm seeing what I'm seeing. He says, first of all, the law diagnoses our condition. He says, if it wasn't for the law, I wouldn't have known sin.

[17:28] That makes perfect sense. The law shows us what sin is. But the law does more than that. It arouses sin within us. You see that in verse 8? Sin, seizing an opportunity produced in me all kinds of covetousness.

Isn't that true? You're told you can't have something straight away you wanted. Isn't that true? And that's what a bad relationship with the law does.

We're attracted to what we aren't allowed to. But the result of that is that the law ultimately condemns us. It shows that we are sinners. If we could obey it, we would have life, but we can't.

So Paul says, the very commandment that promised life proved to be death for me. Now, all of these things are negative, aren't they? That's why Paul says, is the law bad?

He says, no, it's not the law that's bad. It is a relationship to the law that's bad because we are sinners.

[18:29] Imagine we were in here right now and somebody came in and started trying to steal from us. And we were all terrified. If you heard a siren, we would think brilliant.

He would think, I've got a goal. He would want to run. So the same law, siren, would be wonderful for us because we've not done anything wrong, but terrible for him because it highlights his sin.

I'm absolutely useless when it comes to films. I think Corey and Derek are great at giving illustrations from films. I'm not a very big film watcher unless it's a child's film.

So these guys watch Lord of the Rings and all that. Captain Underpants is more kind of my kind of thing. But I have seen the Shawshank Redemption many years ago, which is a fascinating film, a good adult film.

Not for children, but good for adults. It's all about a prison. I won't tell you the whole story, but the prison warden is corrupt. He's done all sorts of awful things.

[19 : 35] Towards the end of the film, he gets found out and he hears the sirens. Those sirens are coming because they stand for truth and uprightness. They're coming to enforce the law, but he knows he's got a bad relationship to that law.

So that siren is a horrible noise for him. Those of you who have seen the film know what happens, but that conveys the idea. A relationship to the law is bad. The law exposes our sin.

It arouses even more sin and it proves that we're deserving of condemnation and we are stuck like that. That's why Paul says the law is holy. The commandment is holy. It's righteous and good.

Does that mean that it was a good thing that's brought death to me? No, it was sin. Sin is the problem. God's law is wonderful, but the realm of sin is pointing us to God's law.

That governing principle that's broken is pointing to us all and saying, see that law. That's your problem. It's restricting you. It's hurting you. It's stifling you. You need to rebel. And of course, it's a lethal trap.

[20 : 38] The very commandment that should be life for us proves to be death. That raises a really important point that we must never forget and it's a point that we always get wrong.

Often, we can think that sin is a bit of fun. Yeah, it's bad, but it's a bit of fun. Often, we can think that sin is going to give us a wee bit of freedom because it would be great to just do what you want to do for a wee while.

And often, we think that sin is going to give us pleasure because it looks very tempting. That's what the devil wants us to think. To think that God is really trying to spoil our lives with his law and he's trying to restrict us.

And that by sinning, we'd actually be freer and happier. That's what he said to Eve. He said, God's trying to restrict you. He's trying to limit you. So often, he'll say the same to you. He'll come to you and he'll say, live a little.

Enjoy life. Come into my realm. Have a bit of fun. And you must never forget that it's a toxic lie.

Because the devil does not want to give you an ounce of fun or pleasure or freedom.

[21 : 38] The devil wants to kill you and destroy you. That's the objective of the realm of sin. That's why Paul says in the end of chapter 6, the wages of sin is death.

Now, that word wages is a really good choice of word because wages describes what you actually get. The kingdom of sin promises us all sorts of things.

But it's got no intention of ever giving them to us. But one thing it will pay out is its wages. Death.

And all of that affects every one of us because we're all born at stage 2. And stage 1's gone. We're born at stage 2. And a lot of people will say, that's so unfair. Too right, it's unfair.

But sin has got no interest in being fair. Sin just wants to destroy you. And if we remain in stage 2, that's exactly what will happen to us. All the beautiful will be swallowed up. And only the horrible will remain.

[22 : 48] But the amazing message of Jesus Christ is that if we put our trust in Him, we move into stage 3. There's a dotted line there because it's not automatic.

You must put your trust in Jesus. It's very simple, not complicated, simple. Just trusting in Jesus takes you from stage 2 into stage 3 where we are saved and recovering.

And a key, key change takes place. The core of our being is restored. Without Christ, the core of our being is broken. It's spiritually dead.

But when we put our faith in Christ, the core of our being is changed. It becomes alive again. The technical term we use for that is regenerated. Jesus uses a great, simpler expression. He just says, we're born again.

So instead of being spiritually dead, we're spiritually alive. Instead of being governed by sin, we're governed by the Holy Spirit. Instead of being under the dominion of sin, we're under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Instead of being slaves of sin, we are slaves of God, slaves to righteousness.

[24 : 00] And the passage we read at the very start describes what happens. Ezekiel tells us that God promises to give us a new heart and a new spirit.

He'll remove that old, broken governing principle, that heart of stone, and give us a heart of flesh. He'll put His Spirit within us. When we come to faith in Jesus, God gives us a new heart. The core of our being is changed. Spiritually, we're no longer dead. We're no longer under the dominion of sin. We're no longer God's evidence. And the immediate result of this is tension. Look at our diagram again. You see, stage two, our whole body is infected. Stage three, the core is healed, but the infection, the effect of the infection is still there. And so we're going from being spiritually and physically broken to being spiritually restored, and yet physically we're not quite fixed. It's only at the final stage, stage four, at the resurrection when Jesus returns, when we are fully fixed.

[25 : 11] At the moment, we have a regenerated core, a fixed governing principle, living in an old nature that's still sold under sin.

That's why Paul in chapter eight says, I eagerly await the redemption. Now listen really carefully to this. He says, he's looking forward to the future. He says, I eagerly await the redemption, not of his soul.

He says, the redemption of my body. Because he's looking forward to his body being fixed, his nature being fixed at the resurrection.

And so we are looking forward to that right now, within the midst of tension. There's an internal battle between our new governing principle and their human nature.

And bit by bit, it has an effect. Did you see that? We changed there. It's not so blue. It's not so red. It's a bit more blue. There's a healing work going on, a restoring work, a sanctifying work, we call it.

[26 : 13] But it doesn't happen instantly. It happens bit by bit. To remind you that throughout the whole of the New Testament, we see a balance between our salvation being something that's already happened and something that's not yet complete, that already not yet balance is always there.

We have been saved. We have been justified. We have been regenerated. But we're still looking forward to being saved when we're brought into the new creation where everything is fixed.

And so a reminder that the cross has dealt with the penalty of sin. The cross has destroyed the power of sin. But the presence of sin will not be dealt with until Christ returns.

So in stage three, our renewed hearts are battling against members that are corrupted by the effects of sin. The beautiful is battling against the horrible.

Now, all of that is theology. But it's all confirmed by experience. And that's what Paul is talking about in this chapter. There's different views on what Paul is referring to in Romans chapter seven.

[27 : 24] But I think he's just talking about himself, talking about what he was before he was converted, what he is now as a Christian. If you read it carefully, you'll notice that there's a switch from past tense to present tense in verse 14.

And he says, this is exactly what it's like for me as a Christian. He says, I do not do the good I want. But the evil I do not want is what I keep doing.

So the right fixed governing principle is saying, I want to do this, but the nature can't quite manage it. And Paul is highlighting the fact that we live in tension. But the wonderful truth is that the part of you that does evil, that does things that are wrong as a Christian, is not the real you.

Because the real you has been restored at the core of your being. But it manifests itself in tension, which is what Paul summarizes. He says there you can read at the very end, I've got the desire to do what it's right, but not the ability to carry it out.

And if you're a Christian, you know how that feels. And in fact, that's a really good question to ask yourself if you're not sure if you're a Christian or not.

[28 : 36] Do you know how that feels to think, I wish I was different. I wish I didn't do these stupid things that I do. Because at the core of your being, you want to be like Jesus and not like the world around us.

Our relationship to ourselves is one of tension. We want to obey God, but we find our bodies don't quite have the ability. We desire to keep God's law, but at the same time we want to ignore it. We hate sin, and yet we're attracted to it. And the result is that we often end up doing things we don't want to do. So we're in a battle. Stage three is a battle between a renewed core and a relation and a nature that is still broken.

God's law is written on our hearts, and more and more and more through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we're going to become drawn more towards what God wants and less to what we want. And

ultimately, we're looking forward to stage four.

Because that's when God's saving work is complete. That's where there's nothing horrible and will be restored and beautiful again.

[29 : 56] That's why when the Bible talks about the new creation, it talks about it as a place where righteousness dwells. So all the red stuff on that diagram is unrighteousness, sin.

There was none of it at stage one, and there'll be none of it in stage four. Now, two key points to conclude in all of this.

All of this means that as Christians, we need to always guard our hearts. We're in stage three. Yes, our hearts have been renewed, but we're constantly battling against this horrible sin that's still mucking us up, and we're still capable of doing horrible things.

And that's one of the most tragic things is that people who have a new heart still end up deceived by the attractiveness of sin. And even Christians still do horrible, horrible things.

And we're just as capable of that, so we need to pray, Lord, keep me. That's a brilliant prayer to pray every day. Lord, keep me. We need to guard our hearts, but at the same time as Christians, we must never, ever, ever lose heart.

[31 : 15] Paul seems frustrated and disappointed by the way he is, but he's also reminding us that we should never, ever, ever lose heart, and never, ever, ever lose hope.

And that brings us to the wee symbols in between the stages. And as I said, all engineers will know what these symbols mean. That's the symbol for a non-return valve, which basically is a valve that you can go through one way, but you can't come back through.

You get it on fuel lines and in all sorts of different things. And the reason I've put non-return valves on that diagram is not just because I used to be an engineer. It's because in each of these stages, there's no going back.

And we've got to remember that from stage one to stage two. We can't work our way back to stage one. We can't try and fix ourselves and get back to that.

There's no going back. We cannot get through that. But the amazing thing is that when you get into stage three, there's no going back. No going back at all.

[32 : 33] And in fact, there's a guarantee that you're just going to go forward and then at stage four, there's no going back either. Never, ever, ever is there ever going to be any going back.

And so even though you're in a battle with your own failings, you must never lose heart because you're never going back. Never. If you're trusting in Jesus. And Paul makes that beautifully clear because at the end of the chapter, it's like he's despairing with himself.

He says, wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? He's so frustrated with himself. And I think every one of us as Christians here knows how that feels. But Paul's statement there is not just a cry of despair because he asks the question, but he also gives the answer.

Who's going to deliver us from these stupid, foolish, wretched, sinful, broken bodies who keep on going back to do the same stupid things again and again, who keep falling into mistakes that wreck our lives?

Who's going to deliver you and me from these mucked up bodies? Jesus will. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

[33 : 41] And that's what makes the gospel so, so good because the world is broken. We are broken, but Jesus has come to fix us. And his great goal is to make humanity beautiful again.

To bring us into that new creation where we will never sin again and humanity will never be horrible again. One day we will be like Jesus.

We'll be conformed to the image of God, the Son. And that's the amazing thing. That if you put your trust in Jesus, nothing can take you back from stage three to stage two, and nothing can ever prevent you from Jesus taking you home into stage four.

And that's why the very next thing that Paul says in Romans is, there's therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ. And he's going to spend the rest of chapter eight telling you how amazing stage three and stage four are.

Thanks be to God. Let's pray. Our Father, we acknowledge that we are tangled up in all the horribleness of sin.

[35 : 09] We just thank you with all our hearts that you sent us, Savior Jesus Christ, to heal us and to rescue us. And we just rejoice in all that you are and in all that you've done for us.

And we pray, oh God, that every one of us would put our trust in you, that you'd bring us into your family, that you would make us your own, because we need you more than anything else. Thank you, Father, so much. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for everything you've done. Thank you, Holy Spirit, that you're the new governing principle in our hearts. Make it true of every one of us and of our family and of our friends and of the people we work with and of the people around us in this city. Lord have mercy. Amen.