

The Venom Within Us All

The Depravity of Man . . . The Deliverance of God – Part V

Romans 3:13

Introduction

One Saturday night in 1899, four reporters from Colorado, met, by chance, in a Denver railroad station. The men worked for the four major Denver newspapers, the *Post*, the *Times*, the *Republican*, and the *Rocky Mountain News*. Each of these four men had the tough assignment of finding a scoop for the Sunday edition. They were hoping to spot a celebrity arriving by train that evening. No celebrity showed up, however, and in fact, nothing newsworthy was happening.

Finally, the four men went to a nearby saloon. One of them made the suggestion that they just make up a story. At first, the men laughed about it. But then, they grew serious enough to decide to, together, concoct a story so incredible that they could be certain that no one could deny it and that their respective bosses would congratulate them for uncovering it. Since a local story would be too easy to prove wrong, they decided to write about a place far away. They agreed on China. By eleven o' clock that night, they had crafted their lie. Their scoop would be that the Chinese government was planning to tear down the Great Wall of China as a sign of international goodwill in order to invite foreign trade.

The next day, all four Denver newspapers carried the story on the front page. The *Times* headline read, *Great Chinese Wall Doomed! Peking Seeks World Trade!*

To their surprise, and chagrin, their fabrication was picked up by other newspapers and was eventually, run throughout the country. The problem was, the story picked up even more fabricated details

along the way. Ultimately, the story stated that a demolition team was arriving from the United States to dismantle the Great Wall.

When the news eventually reached China, many were sure it could not be true. Others were enraged by the audacity of the western world. Particularly angry were members of a secret society nicknamed, "Boxers". They were a group of Chinese patriots who hated any form of foreign presence. Moved to action by this news story, they attacked the foreign embassies in Peking and then, spread out, killing their primary targets – American and British missionaries.

Armed forces arrived from eight different nations to protect their countrymen who had been caught inside the borders of China during this time of bloodshed. The uprising was finally crushed, but not until, as The World Book Encyclopedia reported, houses, churches, and schools were burned to the ground and English and American missionaries, along with many Chinese Christians, were slaughtered.ⁱ

This international crisis, caused by a lie that originated in a Denver saloon, became known as the, "Boxer Rebellion".

What Al Stevens, Jack Tournay, John Lewis, and Hal Wilshire started with their mouths and their pens, led to incredible death and destruction.ⁱⁱ

It should be no surprise to us to find, in the middle of the apostle Paul's description of human depravity, a description of the tongue – and the destructive power of words.

Paul writes in Romans, chapter 3, verses 13 and 14,

[the] throat [of mankind] is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of [vipers] is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness

Thus far, in this inspired sketch of human sinfulness, the Holy Spirit has revealed, through Paul, in verses 10 through 14, who we are.

There is none righteous, . . . none who understands [spiritual things], . . . none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, and together they have become [like soured milk] . . .

That is a revelation of who we are apart from God's redemptive work through Christ!

But, in this second section, for our study today, we are shown what we say.

We have, in Romans, chapter 3:

- in verses 10 through 12, the revelation of mankind's evil condition,
- in verses 13 through 14, the revelation of mankind's evil communication.

Indictments on the Human Heart

Paul now delivers four more indictments on the human heart. This is the diagnosis of depravity. And, it is not a very pretty sight.

In all of my life, I have never been checked by a doctor without having them all do the same thing. I guess they learned in medical school that you begin the examination by reaching into that cabinet, pulling out that wooden Popsicle stick, putting it into the patient's mouth until he gags, and then commanding, "Say ahhhh" – which makes him gag even more.

The truth is, a good physician knows that the mouth is a key window into the physical condition of the body.

The Divine Physician is no less thorough. He begins by opening the mouth and looking into the throat and at the tongue of mankind.

In these verses, the Divine Physician, through the apostle Paul, will make four statements that reveal the divine diagnosis of the corruption within the human heart, revealed by the mouth, the throat, the lips, and the tongue.

The throat exposes hidden depravity

1. The first diagnostic statement is this – the throat exposes hidden depravity.

Notice again, in Romans, chapter 3, verse 13a,

Their throat is an open grave . . .

What does he mean?

A. T. Robertson helps to clarify Paul's meaning by translating the perfect passive participle more literally as, "an opened grave".ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, Paul is not referring to someone who has been buried in an open tomb or to a coffin without a lid. He is referring to a grave that has just been opened. And, the stench of death and the horror of decaying flesh is exposed to all.

We know from biblical illustrations, as well as Roman history, that during this time, coffins were not used. In fact, the ordinary grave of a common person would be along the side of a roadway and would be marked perhaps, by a tree. The majority of people could not even afford a simple grave marker, so burial involved simply placing the corpse in a shallow hole, covering the body with earth, and piling stones on top to keep the animals from getting to the body.

For those who were wealthy, land could be purchased where a chamber tomb would be built or even carved out of a hillside – with shelves carved inside it for the deceased family members. It was in this kind of family tomb that Jesus Christ was temporarily placed.

Most of the people, however, were buried in shallow holes, which a flood, wind storm, falling tree, or any number of things could cause to become an open grave, revealing the decaying body. The grave that had just been opened, whether in a cave or along a roadside, would cause people to turn away from the horrible sight.

This is Paul's point – just as the opening of a grave reveals the death that is within it, so the opening of the human throat reveals the death, corruption, and decay that is in the human heart.

The Greek word that Paul uses for "throat" is "larunx," from which we get our English word, "larynx". The larynx, or the throat, is simply the doorway to the corruption within – and the words that come out of that doorway reveal the decay, the wickedness, and the corruption within the human heart.

Jesus Christ said it this way, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 12, verse 34b,

. . . For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.

Solomon wrote, in Proverbs, chapter 15, verse 28b,

. . . the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.

In other words, the mouth inevitably spills out the secrets of the sinful heart.

Gary Graff, a pastor in Lancaster, Minnesota, wrote a story about a man that he knew. One day, the man went shopping at the local mall. When he was finished and returned to his car, he noticed a foul odor coming from under the hood. He lifted it to discover a rather mutilated cat that had been caught in the fan belt. For those of you who love cats, this story will be troubling, but for the rest of us, it is just one less cat in the world!

Anyway, this unfortunate cat had sought shelter from the cold by getting on the engine block of this man's car. When the man started his car . . . well, you get the idea!

So, there this man stood, that afternoon in the parking lot of the mall, looking at this mangled cat. He decided to empty the contents of one of his shopping bags into another bag and then, to proceed to scrape, pull, and push the remains of that cat into the empty bag. Finally, he got all the grisly remains into the bag, slammed the hood down, and walked back toward the mall to wash his hands. Just as he reached the entrance, he happened to look back, and, when he did, he noticed something unusual. He had tied a knot in the top of the department store bag and had left it on the hood of the car. He saw a middle-aged woman standing next to his car, looking suspiciously back and forth in both directions. She then grabbed the bag off the hood of the car, walked quickly towards the mall, past him, and into the store. The man thought, "This is too good to be true!" and decided to follow her to see what would happen next.

Pastor Graff wrote,

She went into a restaurant in the mall and was seated in a private booth. Once seated, she proceeded to untie the knot and survey her stolen prize. As soon as she opened the bag and saw the dead cat inside, she screamed and then fainted. Of course, the management was alarmed that a customer had fainted in their establishment and so, they called the

paramedics. In no time, the woman was strapped to a cart and ready to be hauled off to the ambulance. The man just couldn't resist. He had taken the bag from the booth and, just as they were putting her inside the ambulance, he ran over and said, "Hey lady, don't forget your bag!" and he laid the bag on top of her.

This woman thought she had gotten away with a prize, but instead, she got a grisly bag of bones.

If you take the nicest looking person, with the nicest clothes, the nicest smile, the nicest connections, and the nicest background; that man or woman who thinks that if anyone has it together, it is them, and just open their mouth, just lift the hood up, and look inside the bag – you will discover the corruption, the decay, the sin, and the death of the human heart.

One writer put it this way,

A spiritually dead heart can generate only spiritually dead words. [But] the natural or unbelieving man keeps his throat wide open, and in so doing continually testifies to his spiritual death by the foulness of his words.^{iv}

The tongue produces great deception

Paul goes on to give us the second diagnostic observation of mankind's evil communication. He writes in Romans, chapter 3, verse 13b,

. . . with their tongues they keep deceiving

2. So, the throat not only exposes hidden depravity, but secondly – the tongue produces great deception.

The verb "deceive," in this verse, means, "to lure into a trap". It was used by the Greeks to refer to a fisherman baiting a hook with a small piece of food to disguise the danger. When the fish grabs that food, he thinks he is going to get a meal, but instead, he becomes the meal.^v

One of the characteristics of the human race is the ability to deceive – to deceive themselves and to deceive others.

The apostle Paul is quoting here from Psalm, chapter 5, verse 9a, where David writes of the human being,

There is nothing reliable in what they say; their inward part is destruction itself.

The prophet Jeremiah, in chapter 9, verses 3 through 5a, said that wicked man is able to,

“. . . bend their tongue like their bow; lies and not truth prevail in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know Me,” declares the Lord. “Let everyone be on guard against his neighbor, and do not trust any brother; because every brother deals craftily, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer. Everyone deceives his neighbor and does not speak the truth, they have taught their tongue to speak lies . . .”

The apostle Paul used the imperfect tense in the verb, translated “deceiving”. You could translate it, “. . . with their tongues they continually keep on deceiving . . .”.

In other words, mankind is by nature a deceiver. Now, that does not mean that he cannot tell the truth from time to time; that he cannot be honest. Paul is referring not so much to singular acts, but to the fact that lying and other forms of deception are a continual, habitual part of man’s character and makeup.

That is why you never have to teach a child how to lie; how to be deceptive; how to be dishonest. Sinful nature has it mastered and, by the age of five, it naturally parades across the stage of human experience. The costumes of deception will only adapt to the different scenes of life.

My wife and I were watching an episode of Candid Camera recently. In a little gift shop, the merchant, who was part of the setup, told customers, who had brought their Christmas presents to the counter, that if they wanted him to, for a fifty cent fee, he would make up a higher price tag and put it on the gift. The recipient of the gift would then think that they had paid more for the gift than they actually had. I was amazed at the people, of all ages, without blinking an eye, paying the fifty cents and saying things like, “This is a great idea.”

Only one man said, “No, I shouldn’t . . . I’m buying this for a family member who is in seminary.”

I was at Home Depot, a few months ago, and asked for some help loading ten bags of fertilizer onto my truck. A young man, in his mid twenties, came out and began to help me. He asked, “Have you rung this stuff up yet?”

I answered, “Not yet.”

He said, “Listen, I’ll tell ‘em you only got five bags . . . that’ll save you twenty dollars. And, if you’ll give me ten dollars, you’ll still save ten dollars on the deal.”

If you can believe it, this guy was wearing a tee shirt with the name of a Baptist church in town, and, on the back of his shirt, was a verse of scripture. I replied, “You’re going to lie and you want me to steal?”

He sort of laughed nervously. That was not the response he was expecting. He said, “Hey, this stuff is overpriced anyway . . .”.

I asked, “Did you forget what shirt you put on this morning?”

He looked down and said, “Oh man.”

I said, “I’m going to call your pastor. I’m the pastor of a church in town too . . . and I know who your pastor is.”

He said, “God’s after me.”

I said, “He evidently is.”

So, we had a little revival service out in the parking lot. He admitted that he was away from God and promised he would never do it again. I only hope, if he did it again, he at least changed his shirt.

The nature of man is to lie and deceive – deceiving with malice; deceiving out of fear; deceiving for financial gain; deceiving by virtue of silence; deceiving by boasting; deceiving by exaggeration; deceiving through insincere promises; deceiving with pious language; deceiving by withholding the truth; deceiving for personal advancement; deceiving through innuendo; deceiving by means of flattery. These are only a few ways the tongue deceives itself and its world.

Paul writes, “. . . with their tongues they continually keep on deceiving . . .”.

The lips speak untold damage

3. The third diagnostic observation is this – the lips speak untold damage.

Paul descriptively writes, in the last part of verse 13,

. . . The poison of asps [vipers] is under their lips

William R. Newell points out that,

. . . the fangs of a deadly serpent lie, ordinarily, folded back in its upper jaw; but when it throws up its head to strike, those hollow fangs drop down, and when the serpent bites, the fangs press a sack of deadly poison hidden [at the base of its mouth], thus injecting the venom into the wound.^{vi}

The apostle Paul is basically saying that in the human mouth is a sack of venom and the tongue dispenses it with its words, like a snake injects it with its fangs.

We were born, as it were, with moral poison sacks under the roof of our mouths; and we naturally strike at one another with venomous words.^{vii}

The apostle James wrote in his epistle, chapter 3, verses 7 and 8,

For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

A couple of years ago, I was in Africa. I believe it was while we were in Nairobi that we visited a reptile house. It was their version of a zoo, only much smaller. It had one building with an open courtyard, surrounded by glass rooms, or cages, where snakes were kept. In the middle of the courtyard was a waist high, circular wall surrounding a shallow pond where one crocodile lay sunning itself. We noticed immediately, upon arriving, that the man who would be our tour guide had only one arm. He explained that he had lost the other one to that very same crocodile in the pond. We kept our distance!

Now, when you visit a zoo in the states, the snakes never move, do they?! You can tap on the window, move your hand up and down, make faces, whatever, those snakes are not interested. That is because they are used to you. Well, in this reptile house, the snakes were so wild and so new to their surroundings that they recoiled as we got close to their cages. We could reach our hand toward the glass and they would lunge at us. Fortunately, we were on the other side of very thick glass.

We eventually came to the prize catch of the establishment. The tour guide proudly introduced, to us, a six foot long black snake called, The Black Mamba. Our guide said, “There is no serum for this venom in Africa. There is no need for it. For, if you are bitten, you can take about seven steps before you fall over dead.”

I was not confident in that glass anymore! In the meantime, our tour guide said it was feeding time and went around to the back and threw, into the cage, a live mouse. It immediately could sense danger and hid behind a piece of wood. The snake moved in and struck the mouse. The mouse, literally, wobbled for

a split second and then, fell over, dead. I was more than ready to leave at that point. I had seen enough!

The apostle Paul, himself, was bitten on the hand by a poisonous snake while marooned on the island of Malta. The story is recorded for us in Acts, chapter 28. Evidently, it was extremely venomous, because the text tells us that the islanders watched Paul, expecting him to, according to verse 6,

. . . suddenly fall down dead . . .

He did not, by the miraculous intervention of God.

It is interesting that the description of the tongue’s power is put into this kind of analogy by Paul. He says, under the diagnostic influence of the Great Physician, “There is poison in our mouths. Our tongues are like fangs which dispense the venom, and it can and will destroy everything around us.”

That means one of our most dangerous enemies is sheltered in our mouths.

Webster defined the tongue as, “that little movable muscular structure attached to the floor of the mouth.”^{viii}

Did you know that, according to the Bible, one of the greatest distinctives of the believer is how you flex that muscle? I want to develop that in more detail in our next discussion, as we continue through verse 14 of Romans, chapter 3. We will take an honest look at what the Bible tells us the believer’s tongue should look like; how it should operate; how it should act.

In the meantime, let me give you something to put into practice immediately. Several years ago, I shared with this body of believers an acrostic on the use of the tongue. A few months ago, someone come to me and told me they still remembered that acrostic and used it often as a guideline.

It is the acrostic, “T.H.I.N.K.”

- T – is it true?
- H – is it helpful?
- I – is it inspirational?
- N – is it necessary?
- K – is it kind?

If what you are about to say does not pass the “T.H.I.N.K.” test, it should not be uttered to another person. That gives new meaning to the old saying, “‘T.H.I.N.K.’ before you speak.”

That is good advice for the church, by the way, and it is good advice for life. In fact, it could literally

revolutionize your work place, your home, your personal relationships, and the unity and fellowship of the church.

Is it any surprise that the apostle Paul, in writing to a church, the Colossian group of believers, in chapter 4, verse 6, urged them with these words,

Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.

I want to look more closely at that phrase, “. . . seasoned with salt . . .”, in our next discussion.

In Romans, chapter 3, verse 13, Paul is talking about the distinctive mark that reveals unbelief is the unbeliever’s mouth. So also then, the distinctive mark of a maturing believer is discovered in the seasoning of the words that roll off that “little movable muscular structure attached to the floor of the mouth.”

May it be as in the words of this song,

I love you Lord, and I lift my voice,

To worship You, O my soul rejoice,

Take joy my King, in what You hear,

May it be a sweet, sweet sound, in Your ear.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/21/2002 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ The World Book Encyclopedia (1977 ed.), p. 435.

ⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, The Disciplines of a Godly Man (Wheaton, IL, Crossway Books, 1991), p. 129.

ⁱⁱⁱ Archibald Thomas Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House, 1931), p. 345.

^{iv} John MacArthur Jr., Romans (Chicago, IL, Moody Press, 1991), p. 188.

^v Ibid., p. 188.

^{vi} William R. Newell, Romans Verse by Verse (Chicago, IL, Moody Press, 1938), p. 83.

^{vii} Ibid., p. 83.

^{viii} Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary