

Godly Despair

In the modern world, we are very dedicated to the idea of progress.

Progress is universally regarded as a good thing.

For a long time, General Electric's corporate motto was: "*Progress is our most important product*" and that still has a nice ring to it.

The positive way we think about progress is reflected in the definition one finds for it in the American Heritage Dictionary: *a steady movement toward a goal; the improvement of an individual, a society, or civilization.*

There is no doubt about the fact that mankind has made a great deal of progress—especially in the past few centuries.

Scientific discoveries have unleashed major technological innovations in transportation, communication, medical science, computer science, agriculture, nutrition—the list could go on and on.

When it comes to improving our material and economic circumstances, we have made enormous progress.

On the other hand, when we examine ourselves as moral and spiritual beings who were created by God and placed on this earth to exercise stewardship over creation and serve our fellow man, we end up with a very different picture.

Yes, we have used science and technology to improve the quality of human life, but we have also used science and technology to wipe out human life.

In the 20th Century alone, more human lives were lost through war and genocide than in all previous centuries combined.

And instead of using science and technology to improve our stewardship of creation, we've allowed them to do serious damage to creation.

Instead of making progress we have actually *regressed* toward the Godlessness, moral anarchy and brutality which pervaded the world before the Flood, when, as we read in Genesis 6: "The Lord saw how great

man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."

There are many opinions about what causes this evil.

One school of thought is that different cultures fear each other through a failure to communicate and the result is war.

Which is ironic since the telephone and the internet have given mankind the ability to communicate instantaneously to anywhere in the world.

Another theory is that poor nations hate rich nations and make war on them to divide the wealth fairly.

Which is also ironic since history shows that it is almost always the rich nations that make war on the poor nations as they strive to build empires.

And there are many other opinions but the fact is that the underlying cause of war and genocide and economic inequality poor stewardship of creation and every other form of human misery—is sin.

Sin is man's fundamental problem because sin separates us from God, and all good things come from God.

When we are separated from God, we look to *creation* to satisfy our needs rather than our *Creator*.

We begin to resemble our nature-worshipping pagan ancestors who tried to conjure spirits out of trees and rocks and animals to supply their needs.

We dispense with the spirits and just use the trees and rocks and animals themselves.

There is a name for depending upon created things rather than the Creator to satisfy our needs: it is called *idolatry*.

Luther defined an "idol" as anything you trusted other than God to keep you safe and make you happy.

The problem with idols, of course, is that they don't do this.

You can serve them with all your heart and soul and mind and strength but they won't keep you safe or make you happy.

What are some of our idols?

I think you already know: worldly success, beauty, fame, sex, eternal youth, popularity, power, wealth.

Probably the most popular idol is wealth, because money is the distillation of power and people believe that if you have enough of it you can get anything you want with it.

And having everything you want will make you happy!

It's a lie, but people believe it.

Actually, money itself is not the real idol of those who are obsessed with accumulating it: their real idol is to be admired and envied by their fellow human beings.

Back in the 19th Century, a man by the name of Thorstein Veblen described this phenomenon in a book entitled *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

In it he described what he called "conspicuous consumption" and "conspicuous leisure."

He said that the rich like to flaunt their wealth to the public by displaying their possessions.

By living in mansions and driving expensive cars and taking exotic vacations.

Their goal is social status and prestige; they want people to say, "I wish I were like them."

I know a man who made a lot of money managing fast food restaurants.

He built a beautiful house in an exclusive neighborhood which included a \$250,000 swimming pool.

Then another man bought the property next to his and built a bigger house, and it took the shine off of the one he had built.

His goal was not just to show that he was wealthy; his goal was to show that he was **wealthier** than everyone else.

"The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil."

The wealth idol propels a person down a slippery slope from hope to disappointment, from disappointment to resentment, from resentment to bitterness, and from bitterness to despair.

Poor or rich, the lover of money will never have enough.

Far from making him safe and happy, his idol will devour him.

And it's the same with any idol: you can never have enough beauty or sex or youth or popularity.

You will always crave more. That's what idols do to you.

Think of all the hugely popular entertainers and movie stars who end up suicides or die from drug overdoses.

It's only when we turn away from our idols and turn back to God that He can help us.

Listen to Moses' words in *Deuteronomy*: *"The Lord will judge his people and have compassion on his servants **when he sees their strength is gone....**"*

We have to give up on other sources of strength before we can turn to God to receive His strength.

And that is why God sometimes takes away our idols so that we will have no choice but to turn to Him.

He *reduces* us to faith alone.

There is a story told about an ancient practice of Basque shepherders.

When they have a lamb that they can't keep from wandering off from the herd, they break its leg and then nurse it back to health so that the lamb learns to depend upon the shepherd for everything.

The lamb has to be taught where its true source of health and safety lies.

God calls idols "nothing."

"Where are their gods? There is no god besides me."

Idols have no substance: they have no enduring reality.

We alone endow them with form and substance by serving them.

We alone give them power over our lives; apart from our servitude, they have no power.

When we realize this the Holy Spirit can go to work in our lives to bring us back into a relationship with the One True God.

But first, our willful idolatry has to be dismantled.

When we worship creation rather than our Creator, we are seeking things from the world that we can only receive from the Creator of the world.

Things like peace, hope, love, security, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

This is what led Luther to comment that there was a kind of Godly despair that was an indispensable part of every Christian's life journey.

A despair that brought them close to God's grace.

The psalmist put it this way: *"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* (Psalm 34:18)

What is true of each one of us is also true of our beloved world.

In spite of all the material progress mankind has made, our world is going to go to the dogs.

The Scriptures make that clear.

Listen to Jesus' words in today's Gospel lesson.

"As they led Jesus away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never

nursed....For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

The words are clear and the message is terrifying: ***this world is going to turn into a living hell.***

"If they do these things when the tree is green, what will they do when it is dry?"

Here are some of the things they have done as the tree has become dry.

Two thousand years after Jesus spoke these words, Adolph Hitler murdered over six million Jews.

Josef Stalin ordered the forced starvation of over seven million Ukrainians, deported hundreds of thousands of others to gulags where they were worked to death, and was planning to exile two million Jews to Siberia when he died.

Japanese soldiers raped, tortured and murdered over 550,000 Chinese in a little over six months during what historians call the Rape of Nanking.

Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia under the leadership of Pol Pot, systematically exterminated over two million Cambodians.

The soldiers who carried out this mass murder were ordered to save their ammunition for more important uses and to use bamboo stakes and agricultural tools whenever possible to kill their victims.

Twenty-seven years ago in Rwanda, the government set about purging the country of "dissidents" by murdering 8000 Rwandans a day for 93 days.

Mao Zedung's "Great Leap Forward" campaign to industrialize China resulted in the starvation of an estimated 40 million Chinese.

These are the things men do as the tree becomes dry. And they almost always do them in the name of "progress."

This can lead us to despair.

Why should we even *try* to make this world a better place?

Who is able to undo—indeed, even make a dent—in evil of this magnitude?

But in the same way as despairing of our idols can turn us to God for help, so can despairing of our utopian dreams of building heaven on earth turn us to God.

Here is the unvarnished truth folks: man cannot build a utopia for himself here on earth because, as someone once said, you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

And as the horrific facts you have just heard clearly illustrate, man in his unredeemed condition is a sow's ear.

But the good news I have for you today is that God CAN make a silk purse out of a sow's ear!

He does it every day!

But He doesn't do it through ideologies or politics or perfect governments: He does it one person at a time by kindling a flame of faith and hope in the human heart and then sending that person out to kindle the same flame in another human heart.

He does it by leading us into despair over OUR strength and OUR world so that we will seek His strength and His Kingdom.

Such despair is Godly despair—not a despair which leads to death, but a despair which leads us back to the Source of Life.

Amen.

