

Sermon 11-18-18  
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Trinity Lutheran Church  
W. Hempstead, NY  
For the American Day of Thanksgiving

### **In Between**

Last week you heard me quote several times from a book by former atheist, Peter Hitchens. His brother, Christopher, remained an atheist and died an atheist. In 2009, Christopher Hitchens wrote a book entitled, god is not Great. Notice that God has a small “g” and great has the capital “G.” The subtitle of the book is “How religion poisons everything.”

Two things I find remarkable about the title. First, if God does not exist, how can He be either Great or not great? Second, if religion poisons everything, then how can the religion of atheism be excluded? For atheism qualifies as a religion. Like all religions, it has an origins narrative. It tries to find meaning in an otherwise meaningless universe. It tries to find morality in the midst of an amoral universe. And it has a myth of human destiny – namely that there is nothing beyond the grave.

In his own book, The Rage Against God, Peter parodies the title of his brother’s book by saying that in reality it’s man who is not great. Peter says this with conviction after examining the great 20<sup>th</sup> century atheist attempts to build utopia on earth – utopia based upon the idea that human beings are perfectible. Every one of these attempts involved great misery, enslavement and hideous bloodbaths. Present day attempts continue to arrive at the same place.

After so much documented death and misery, it seems rather strange that people would continue in this belief of human perfectibility and utopia. However, in the heart of every dreamer, there is this idea that if they were in charge of humanity, the perfect society could be created. It’s a shining belief in their own righteousness as defined by themselves, and in the righteousness of their cause. It’s the shining belief that they can succeed where the righteousness of the Lenin’s, Stalin’s, Pol Pot’s and Mao Tse Tung’s of this world failed. Peter Hitchens says that if you meet such a person, run away as fast as you can. They may not know it, but in reality they are vying to be the next bloodthirsty dictator on this wretched earth.

Strangely enough, the idea of human utopia is probably as old as America itself. The other day I listened to a teaching by radio talkshow host, Michael Medved. He pointed out that the Pilgrims did not come here because of religious persecution. Later religious groups did, but the Pilgrims did not. They had fled persecution in England ten years earlier. At the time they chose to come to the new world, they were living in religiously tolerant Holland. However, being strong Christians, they were not happy in worldly Holland. They longed to come to a place where they could start afresh and build their vision of God’s true commonwealth on earth. In other words, they were looking to build Christian utopia.

I suppose that’s one of the reasons that they began Plymouth colony under the primitive form of communism mentioned in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. It didn’t work. They almost starved to death in the first year. It was only

when the leaders gave up communalism and assigned every person their own plot of land to farm that food production jumped and became adequate.

The Pilgrims belonged to a larger group of Christians called the Puritans who were attempting to create Christian utopia on earth. Their attempt got as far as what is known as the Puritan Revolution in Britain in the 1640's. They beheaded the king and turned England into a commonwealth under their Christian dictator, Oliver Cromwell. However, the commonwealth ultimately failed and the king was restored.

In the U.S. the Pilgrims' Plymouth colony ultimately was absorbed into the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony based in Boston. This too was an attempt to build a fully Christian civilization on earth. But it also ultimately failed. What New England state today is a Puritan Christian utopia?

The reason for the failure is that Scripture contains no promise that God will actually build His righteous society on this present earth. Scripture promises that the saints will reign in righteous perfection with Jesus Christ in the age that is coming. But God has no intention of establishing Christian utopia on this present earth.

Consider what Jesus said to Pilate in John 18:36, "... 'My kingdom is not of this world.'" Consider also what He said to everyone in Mark 12:17, "... 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.'" It's clear that the Lord Jesus will continue to let the Caesar's of this world rule until He returns to claim His throne. For the present, Jesus' only throne on this earth is in the hearts of believers.

And as far as human perfectibility goes, let's check what Scripture says. Paul emphatically declared in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" This is most encouraging. However, he declared in Romans 7:21-25, "21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Notice. Paul called our bodies, "bodies of death." This is not just because we die physically, but because our very DNA programs us to be attracted to sin. Our sinful nature is attached to our bodies. Therefore, we need to be rescued from these bodies of death. The good news of the gospel is that we have been rescued. Jesus has done it. He gave up His sinless body to be punished for all sin. As a result our spirits can be born again in this age. On account of Jesus our lives can be justified before God. However, the rebirth of our physical bodies must wait until the resurrection when Jesus Christ returns. As it is written in Romans 8:23-24, "23... we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, *the redemption of our bodies*. 24 For in this hope we were saved." Hope it is, and that's the point. It's God's plan to resurrect us in holy bodies that will never sin nor die again. But that must wait for the Day of the Lord.

Therefore, in this present age, Christians live in a strange in-between world. On the one hand, if we are in Christ we are new creations able to walk in the righteousness of Christ. On the other hand, our sinful natures are crippled by sin, our fear of death and the power of the devil. We are caught in the constant struggle

of being both saint and sinner at the same time. The old nature must daily be put to death with Christ so that the new nature can live.

For this reason we need to constantly partake of what God has provided for us – His Word and His Sacraments. For through them we receive the grace necessary to continue in Christ’s righteousness. The good news is that if we confess our sin, God who is faithful and just forgives our sin and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. That’s why we’re here in church. And at length we can die in the grace of Jesus Christ and be resurrected in sinless human bodies on the great Day of the Lord. But for now, these bodies are one big hassle to us, both physically and spiritually.

It’s for this reason that we are not perfectible in this life. It’s for this reason that no human society is perfectible on this earth. Man is not great. Therefore, all human attempts to create utopia are not only futile, but very dangerous. Peter Hitchens concluded from his study of the matter and his experience with it that utopia “can only be approached across a sea of blood.”<sup>1</sup>

The people who founded the United States were steeped in Christian teaching. They knew that human beings are not perfectible in this present age. They knew that political power can create tyranny. Therefore, when they designed a system of government, utopia was the furthest thing from their minds. Rather, they designed a government based on checks and balances. Powerful political forces opposed to each other do create gridlock. But they can prevent power from being abused. They also prevent experiments in utopia. So far, the system the founders created has made this country one of the freest and most prosperous in the world.

However, at present we are threatened from within by those who refuse to accept that utopia is impossible. What makes such people dangerous is that they believe themselves intrinsically righteous and they believe in the intrinsic righteousness of their cause. Causes can be righteous. But when every experiment in the kind of utopia they believe in has ended in rivers of blood and abject misery for the last hundred years, how can they continue to believe? How can they believe obvious monstrous evil to be good? There’s only one answer. They rebelliously believe in their own greatness, when it is only God who is great. Man is not great.

The twentieth century comedian, Groucho Marx, once quipped that he would never belong to a club that would have him as a member. You have to think about that for a few seconds. But true humor has a solid foundation in truth. Groucho was poking fun at the darkness in his own heart. If we’re honest with ourselves, we all know this same troubling darkness within. It has a way of rearing its ugly head to our detriment and the detriment of those around us. As someone else once quipped, if you ever find the perfect church, don’t join it. You’ll ruin it.

Contemplating the darkness within our souls is not pleasant. In fact, I’ll bet you wish you were somewhere else right now. But ironically, it’s the only way for civilization to survive. For if I know my own darkness, I’ll seek to put a curb on it.

And the only possible real curb against the darkness is God Himself. God’s Law acts as a curb, but sinful human nature defies God’s Law. It’s only when God’s Holy Spirit enters the heart that we can begin doing things God’s way. Indeed, consider this great promise made about 600 years before Jesus. Ezekiel 36:27, “... I will put

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<sup>1</sup> Hitchens, Peter *The Rage Against God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) p. 153

my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” God’s Spirit is the only real curb against the darkness within. And the great promise of Ezekiel 36 was fulfilled when Lord Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh on the Day of Pentecost 33A.D. The best that human beings can do in this life comes when God’s Holy Spirit graciously walks us down God’s pathways – the pathways that are found in His holy Word.

American founding father, John Adams, once wrote, “The Christian religion as I understand it, is the brightest of the glory and the express portrait of the character of the eternal, self-existent, independent, benevolent, all-powerful, and all-merciful Creator, Preserver and Father of the universe, the first good, the first perfect and the first fair. It will last as long as the world.... Religion and virtue are the only foundations, not only of republicanism and of all free governments, but of social felicity [happiness] under all governments and in all the combinations of human society. Science, liberty, and religion are the choicest blessings of humanity; without their joint influence no society can be great, flourishing, or happy.”<sup>2</sup>

Christianity has played a definite role in the civil life of the United States of America. It has a role yet to play. It can keep us safe from the delusions of those who would build utopias based on their own definitions of good and evil. For Christianity presents us with our Creator’s definitions of good and evil, and God’s Spirit can hold us fast to God’s definitions. As it says in Psalm 33:12, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD....”

Therefore, as this Thanksgiving Day approaches, let us keep in our hearts our Creator’s purpose for our lives. It is His purpose that we should all know the darkness we are born in. It’s His purpose that we should all know the very light of God, Jesus Christ, His Son who came to redeem us from the darkness. It is His purpose that we should deny all human utopias, and instead wait patiently for the great Day of the Lord, God’s Day of perfection. In the meantime, it’s God’s purpose that we should govern ourselves in ways that can enable all citizens to flourish in freedom. It’s also God’s purpose that we alleviate suffering wherever we find it in whatever way we can. To God’s purposes, then, let us commit ourselves, giving thanks to Him for His every good and gracious gift. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.

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<sup>2</sup> Morris, Benjamin F., *The Christian Life and Character of the Civil Institutions of the United States* (Powder Springs, GA., American Vision, 2007) p. 147