



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Gospel”

Galatians 1:11-12

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Our scripture lesson is short, only two verses, but it could be even shorter because I really want to focus on one word Paul uses, “Gospel,” which means “good news.”

¹¹I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

I have said from this pulpit before that the doctrine of original sin is one of the most profound doctrines of the faith. We humans are limited, are tempted to pride or shame, and have free choice so we will never be perfect or make perfect choices. In the end, we are saved only by grace.

Yet, sometimes Christians have used the doctrine of original sin as an enormous cop-out. Misunderstood, the doctrine can be taken to the extreme of giving up and doing what we want. [“We are sinners, there is no good in us, and since the only hope we have is God’s radical forgiveness snatching us from the jaws of death and the gates of Hell, let’s just give up hoping the world is going to become a better place.”](#)

Yet, maybe some things in this world have gotten better. Want to hear some good news?

- Since 1900, global life expectancy has more than doubled and the average is now about 70 years old. That’s worldwide. In America in 1900, average life expectancy was 47. Today, in the country that has the lowest life expectancy, the Central African Republic, it is 53 years old.



- Child mortality has plunged a hundredfold since 1750. Again, I am not reporting a first world phenomenon. Though it is true that third world countries have lagged, there is not a single country on earth where child mortality is not lower than it was in 1950.
- One might ask, “Well if people are living longer, are their physical bodies outlasting their mental capacities? Yes, that is sometimes true, and we need to address quality of life, but you might like hearing that the average age of diagnosis of dementia has risen from 80 years old in the year 2000 to 83 years old today.

Yes, there are a lot of problems in the world, but that’s some encouraging news of progress.

Now there *have been* long chapters of human history where a bleak view of the future seemed justified. In some places and times- often lasting centuries- there was little hope for future progress because there was so little evidence of progress in the past:

times of great stress and hardship;

times of tyranny,

of never-ending wars;

times when most children did not live to be adults.

of massive starvation in prolonged famine,

of widespread death due to viruses uncontained.

of centuries of enslavement,

times when designated “undesirables”

were given little hope of ever being treated with dignity.

There are still many bleak places in our world, but do you want some good news about problems that once seemed beyond solving?

- Worldwide, starvation has been on a sharp decline. Forty-five years ago, 35% of the world’s population was undernourished. Today’s level is still unacceptable but is much less at 13%. And this is true despite an increase of 5 billion people in the population. Famines are now continuous realities only in Ethiopia and Sudan.
- Poverty is hard to measure, but by whatever measure is used, there has been an incredible shift from extreme poverty where food, shelter, and clothing are at issue. True, there remains tremendous inequality, but *if* the question is not “[Who has more?](#)” but “[Who has enough?](#)” the world has made huge strides. And most of the population today has available to them what was not available to the Carnegies, Mellons or Rockefellers of the 1800s: indoor plumbing, chlorinated water, antibiotics, and a number of means of communication and transportation.

Christians have through the centuries clung to the hope that the world and our lives are in God’s hands. We are called to trust in God and pray to God in times of trouble. We trust that God hears the cries of those who are in need- the oppressed, the hungry, the lost, the sick and the dying. Faith truly has been a source of strength and a means of grace.



But, trust in God is sometimes been taken to extremes when people *wait* for God to do what they can do for themselves; when logical, common sense measures are not followed.... such as, while praying for health: not washing hands, or exercising and eating right, or not taking antibiotics or getting vaccinated, and abstaining from controlled substances....

Want some good news?

- *Eliminated* today are the mass killers that were smallpox, elephantiasis, river blindness and blinding trachoma. And it looks like the day is coming when measles, rubella, yaws, sleeping sickness and hookworm might be eliminated as well. AIDS is now a manageable disease.

Over the centuries Christians have not only placed their own lives in God's hands but have placed the lives of others in God's hands. Surely God will hear the cries of those at risk in neighborhoods other than our own, or in places of need on other continents, in cultures we do not understand.

But some Christians who in prayer place these matters in God's hands, leave prayer and return to their operating assumption that the problems and wrongs of this world are as they always were and nothing will ever change. Violence and wars, injustice and hatred; they always will be with us. People will continue to kill each other on the streets or on the battlefield, racism and greed are woven into the fabric of our world, tribalism and nationalism will always lead to wars between states or civil wars within them.

But is it true that nothing gets better?

- Wars have greatly decreased. During World War II, there were 300 battle deaths per 100,000 people. Since then, the line has worked its way down to where in 2016 there were 1.2 war deaths per 100,000 people. We know of the recent tragedy of 4 million Syrian refugees- it was awful and this congregation responded generously- but that number is dwarfed by ten million during the Bangladesh War, 14 million caused by the partition of India and sixty million caused by the Second World War.
- While there is much that needs yet to be done, any honest measurement debunks the notion that no progress has been made in granting equal rights in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation. In 1900, "women could vote in only one country. Today they can vote in every country in which men can vote but one, Vatican City." The poverty rate among African Americans has fallen from 55% in 1960 to 18.8% in 2019, and life expectancy has risen from 33 in 1900 to 75 today (for whites, it is 77 years). So much needs to be done to overcome racism, but the self-defeating notion that nothing has changed cannot be supported by the data. We *can* do better because we *have* done better which means we are capable of doing better.

Here's some more random good news:

- Crime rates have fallen, with drugs being the biggest drag on their falling further.
- Accidental poisonings have decreased, with drug overdoses being the big drag on their falling further.



- Thanks to driving laws, seatbelts, safer cars and a decrease in drunk driving, there has been a 24-fold reduction in automobile deaths over the last century.

The news is not good on every front, of course. For instance, global warming is getting worse, and the world has got to give it greater attention (it might mean, among other things, getting used to the idea of safer nuclear energy). World population continues to grow..., though the line *is* curving toward the day of decline.

So, I am not being pollyannish, but simply pointing to data that suggests that in many other measures of human well-being, including areas of justice and compassion, the data shows the world making progress. The reason why progress has been made is complicated, but the data shows that overall the world has advanced even in areas near and dear to Jesus’ heart:

providing shelter for the homeless,
 food for the starving,
 healing for the sick, and
 comfort for the dying.

That is the contention, at least, of the book *Enlightenment Now*, by Harvard professor Stephen Pinker..., although he doesn’t much care what Jesus thought. It is important to Pinker to focus on verifiable data in discussing whether or not progress is being made in the world. He is relentless in presenting raw data and graphs, much of which I quoted even while sometimes updating his 2018 numbers with 2021 numbers.¹ Anyone can quote and shape statistics, of course, but when I did independent research on the web to verify, I found numbers consistent with those he reported.

Pinker also adds that *almost no one knows most of this good news*. Whether the topic is politics, race relations, crime, the pandemic, the state of education, or other areas, we’ve been given the sense that the world is spiraling down. Many accept as fact that the world is becoming more dangerous and quality of life is declining for all but the wealthy. “**Nothing has changed.**” “**We’ve gotten nowhere,**” are phrases frequently heard whether the topic is human rights, race relations, crime in the streets, or war in the world.

What is odd about these convictions, Pinker says, is that when you ask most people if their personal future is bright, most say “**Yes.**” Again, I’m not talking about Americans, I am talking about the world’s population. Researchers call this “the Optimism Gap”² where one is optimistic about one’s own life but pessimistic about the world.

Why is that? Why are we Americans so quick to jump to the conclusion either that *nothing has changed* or that *nothing will change* when it comes to the problems and evils of life?

Pinker has his own opinions which, predictably, he backs up with data and graphs. He points to the human fascination with shocking and disturbing stories. They stick with you. You

¹ All the following examples are taken from Pinker’s book.

² Quote from Pinker, *Enlightenment Now; The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*, 2018; with McNaughton-Cassill and Smith 2002, Nagdy and Roser 2016, Vennhoven 2010; and Whitman 1998 referenced.



remember the interesting stuff and forget the boring, often positive, stuff. Then, when a topic comes up, the first thing that comes to mind is the last bad and shocking thing you heard about it.

He points to journalists who, in this cable and internet age, are rewarded for stories that grab attention. And, because we consumers choose the news we want to hear and read, media silos are quick to provide stories about the failings and dangers of those with whom we disagree, and we get this looming sense of catastrophe unless one side wins.

He points to the Academics who are rewarded for critique. Most Ph.Ds in the humanities and social sciences are not given for dissertations about what is working but about what is not working and needs to be fixed.

And he points to religious people who he says let their convictions get in the way of reason and data.

Pinker himself is an academic, and he is empathetic about why things are the way they are. He says,

- Humans are wired the way they are because while we are capable of reason, we are storytelling creatures.
- Journalists need viewers and readers if they want to get paid, and without journalism the problems and wrongs of life would never be exposed.
- Politicians go way overboard but having politicians go after each other at least is a sign of democracy and, in Pinker's view, there is more possibility of human well-being in democracies than there are in totalitarian governments.
- Academics also keep us on our toes with their critiques, and they do the deep dive study that leads to breakthroughs and to progress.

Sadly, the only people for whom Pinker doesn't give a break are religious people. He seems to think that all those who believe in God are incapable of trusting science, believing data or considering other points of view. He doesn't consider that religious people might make the same mistakes as others, only with a religious accent.

Let's leave that alone for now, though. I'll take that up with Pinker if and when the Harvard professor ever decides he wants to give me a call and have a conversation about it.

But what I will say is that religious people- including Christians- are *like* journalists, politicians, and Academics in that we can *get in our own way*.

The Christian faith is about the Gospel. It is *about* good news. The Gospel, *rightly* heard, believed and lived, has been in this world a force for good because it has been about love and hope. I can understand why shock and anger are sometimes appropriate and needed to identify wrong, demand change and galvanize people to action, but over the centuries hope that we actually can become better and do better has been a much better motivator than despair, shame, anger, and hatred. Hope inspires persistence, optimism, study, and hard work. When there is failure, people of hope try again.

Here's where Christians have gone wrong. They have gone wrong when they saw the Gospel of Jesus Christ as an *Out*: Simply a ticket out of sin and death, out of engagement with the



world, out of the hard work of doing something about those areas of life of which Jesus himself was so deeply concerned while he lived in this world. No, the Gospel of Jesus is not an *Out*, it is an *In*. It is a call to followers of Jesus to go into the world and work for the Kingdom of God... the Kingdom of God, which is *in the world*, not just in the world to come.

What the Gospel is not are those notions I mentioned earlier in the sermon.

It is not believing that this world itself is evil or that God's realm is only something that is to come. It is understandable that there have been times and places where Christians have clung to the hope that they will be rescued from this life. Hoping and praying for the "sweet by and by" sustained many a slave who had nothing much else to cling to, and what sustained parents in centuries past who outlived most of their children. But even though in Jesus day, the average life expectancy was in the 30s, that Jesus and his followers lived under a totalitarian government, and poverty and death due to now curable diseases were rampant, his message was not about escape or about taking Pilate's out of washing hands of the world's problems.

In his first sermon, he announced that "**The Kingdom of God is at hand.**" The tense of the verb is not future, but present tense. "Right now, here in this place, the Kingdom of God is at hand."

That he wasn't simply calling people to conversion but calling them to engagement he soon made very clear.

- Matthew says that the beginning of his ministry was about teaching, preaching, *and healing*.
- When Jesus heard that his imprisoned cousin, John, was discouraged and wondering if Jesus was yet another failed messiah, Jesus sent this message to him: "**The blind are seeing, the lame are walking again, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.**"³
- When Jesus told his disciples to follow him, it was to do the same work of the kingdom. Confronted by the hungry, he told them to find food. Confronted by the sick, he told them to help in their healing.
- He set the self-righteous straight and he told those with resources to put their resources to compassionate use.

The Gospel certainly is not this idea that we just need to trust and believe that God will work things out and all that is needed is for us to pray that God will get it done.

Yes, God is in all that is good, but this notion that we have no role is what most needs to be done is the notion that we most need to surrender. Remember all the real-life good news of progress that I scattered throughout this sermon; advances in health, peace, violence, life-expectancy? The thing both Pinker and the Jesus-he-doesn't-believe-in would emphasize is that none of those advances happened on their own. It took a massive commitment to see problems as problems to be solved, and not just saying, "**Well, that's the way it always has been.**" Marriages can heal. Trauma can be overcome. Many diseases can be healed and many diseases that cannot be

³ Luke 7:22.



healed can now be better managed. Those who live on the edge of starvation or who are in abusive families and cultures can be delivered. But, when it happens, it is never because enough of us wish it so. It is because many, including those who pray for God to be in it, help make it so.

Christians are not alone in wanting to make life better. Our faith gives us a perspective. We want life to be better for everyone, and when we see evidence of justice and compassion in the world we go beyond relief to giving thanks because we see God's hand in it. And, yes, we also see evidence of a world to come where God makes all things new.

Friends, this is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are known, we are loved, we are forgiven, and we are called. That is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let's open our eyes to what is good or can be good in us and around us and join in spreading the goodness to others. So much more of what reflects Jesus' heart can be done. Let us follow Jesus and join with others who believe in him and join with others who don't believe in him to help accomplished what Jesus said that God wants accomplished in this world.

