

"God Clears Distractions"

Text: Philippians 4:4-13

May the love of God the Father fill you with wonder and awe, may the sacrifice of the Son fill you with gratitude and humility, and may the indwelling of the Holy Spirit fill you with faith, zeal, and wisdom. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

So, how is your general outlook these days? How do you feel about your future? How do you feel about your country's future? How do you feel about our society and what is promoted, justified, even flaunted? What are the chances that great evils like abortion and anarchy will soon be eradicated in this country, that the pandemic will abate, and the riots cease? Do you imagine that our public schools and universities will stop filling the hearts and minds of our impressionable young people with evil, that our national morality will soon improve, and that our society will soon return to the God they have expelled from their lives?

More and more, Christians are tempted to become depressed, demoralized, even pessimistic. Christians are increasingly distressed about the direction we seem to be headed as a nation, as a society, as human beings. Why are these things happening to us? Why is God allowing so many dark and ominous clouds to envelop our nation? Why are the lawless, greedy, and dishonest – the *godless* – being allowed to drag those who honor God and play by the rules down with them? Why does the moral fiber of our country seem to be unraveling before our eyes?

By way of an answer, let me ask you a few more questions. How do you feel about your eternal future? How do you feel about your God – your Savior Jesus Christ? How do you feel about the forgiveness of your sins? How do you feel now, during these times, about your understanding that all of this will one day pass away? How do you feel about eternity, and the assurance from your God that you will spend all of eternity with him in perfect, blissful joy?

Maybe that's the answer to why our God has allowed this dark pall to overshadow our country. Maybe things were never as good as we imagined they were in this sin-broken world. Maybe the veneer of peace and prosperity simply masked the evil that was always there, but is now making its presence obvious. Maybe it is only in times like this that we can read words like those that we find in our text for this morning with

any sort of real and authentic appreciation, passion, and understanding. Hear then with renewed interest the words of our text, found in the Fourth Chapter of Paul's Letter to the Philippians:

^{ESV} **Philippians 4:4-13** *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸ ¶ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me--practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. ¹⁰ ¶ I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

These are the very words of our God, written for our instruction and growth, our redirection and comfort. That each one of us, personally, might gain such gifts – and countless others – so we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth.**" Amen.

There is a saying in the sports world that "*Winning is the best deodorant.*" The same saying holds true many times over in society at large. Opulence and material wealth (winning, in the world's eyes) are the great "deodorizers" that tend to mask the rot that is all around us.

Our culture is even now in an advanced state of decay. Many Christians share the sense that our very patient God is about to lose patience with our decadent society. The sum total of our national crisis is not just the sexual debauchery that is everywhere, but that such depravity is an obvious and disturbing symptom of even greater problems. Passages from God's Word spring to mind, words like: "**...and God gave them up to vile passions... God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor**

their bodies among themselves." The words of the imprisoned and condemned Apostle Paul appear to be coming true before our eyes: **"But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ² For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power."** 2 Timothy 3:1-5

To be sure, this rot has existed since the fall in the Garden. It didn't suddenly appear; it just seems to be getting much more obvious. In the past this cancer has often been masked by affluence and prosperity. We have fallen for the ancient myth that fooled every godless civilization since the creation of man – the illusion that material wealth is a testament to God's favor and approval. The Assyrians believed it. The Babylonians believed it (they feasted on the very night when God visited his wrath on them). The Persians believed it. The Greeks believed it. The Romans believed it. All perished at the hand of the God of heaven and earth, who had simply had enough.

But why must such things happen in *this* country, where so many Christians struggle mightily to be **"in the world but not of the world"**? The answer is undoubtedly because we Christians are continually in danger of losing sight of the one thing needful. We are in constant danger of selling our eternal birthright in heaven for a mess of pottage on earth. We are in danger of being distracted to death.

That's exactly why we meet here regularly – to have God himself breathe life and hope into our lives with his words of eternal comfort. Against the dark and ominous backdrop of current events, the words of our text shine all the more brightly and sound all the more sweet, all the more comforting, all the more applicable and focusing to our ears. They are pure balm for the soul. They are blessings from a loving God to teach us how to deal with the distraction that represents such peril to our souls. Hear again those opening verses of our text: **Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸ ¶ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever**

is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me--practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Doesn't all of the trouble and uncertainty simply melt away when the Holy Spirit *redirects* our hearts and aspirations with these words? How can any Christian not be calmed and reassured by such divine promises, such solid and sure words of comfort and security? Life, for the child of God, was never about this existence here on earth. Here we will never be "winners" – not according to the world's way of reckoning. We will never be rich enough, happy enough, secure enough. *No one ever is.* The world's "game" is gathering that which is here today and gone tomorrow. That game is an unwinnable illusion, a shadowy phantom that hovers always just beyond our reach. It is the same false promise that Satan made to our Savior in the wilderness when he offered all of the kingdoms of the world if Christ would but bow down and worship him.

Yet with the passage of time and the accumulation of wealth, even Christians begin to be deceived and preoccupied. The only possible remedy is for our loving God to clear away the distractions. Only then is our vision cleared and our Godly perspective restored.

Feeling anxious about your material well-being? You should, because it will most certainly fail - sooner or later. God will always give us what we need to carry on his work, since he has promised us that, but what is God supposed to do when we become preoccupied with *our* work and distracted from *his*? What can we expect from a merciful, loving God when we focus our lives on *our* goals rather than his? The big picture is always eternity, which is how our God always operates.

That's how, that's *why*, the words of our text this morning drive from our hearts all fear and anxiety. They promise that which nothing and no one can ever take away. The lien that Satan held against our immortal souls has been removed because our Savior has paid our sin-debt in full. The devil can never foreclose on your soul. Our home in heaven can never be repossessed. You and I could never hope to provide that sort of backing, but Jesus could – and did. That's what Good Friday and the cross were all about.

Let me take you finally to a very ghastly place and to a situation that the world would consider both tragic and profoundly unfair. You remember the setting of Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. Paul wrote those words from the physical deprivation of a dank, depressing Roman prison, and he wrote them under the sentence of imminent death. Life held no promise for him, save a few more days or weeks of hardship, followed by a cruel and painful death. Yet he could deal with this. How? Why? *Because God had cleared away the distractions.* He explained in our text: **"I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me."**

Paul was so perfectly focused in those last days not because life on earth held such promise, but precisely because it held *no promise whatsoever*. There remained no distractions to divert his attention, and so he knew only the contentment of eternal victory. We, on the other hand, find distractions everywhere – and we have not dealt with them particularly well. It's not that we lack instruction or guidance, since that is exactly what God gave us in his Word, including our text for this morning. The problems come when we don't use our God-given wisdom to deal as Paul did with both **"plenty and hunger... abundance and need."** Our entire society has demonstrated a profound ignorance when it comes to dealing with prosperity. Our merciful God often uses a variety of means to point to a better way.

"These are the times that try men's souls" Thomas Paine wrote during the dark days of our Founding Fathers' struggle for independence. Maybe the times and situations we are in today are really the times that *rescue* men's souls. And maybe things will need to get a whole lot worse before we finally get it. God alone knows what hardships must be allowed before we regain our focus and direction, before we exercise our Christian wisdom. Hear his call and rededicate yourselves to kingdom work – that "one thing needful" Jesus always talked about. Then the joy and comfort that is ours through the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus Christ will shine all the more brightly against the ever-darkening backdrop of the world around us. Then, as is our calling, others will see our joy, our confidence, what it is that we are all about, **"and glorify our Father who is in heaven."**

When the world around us is filled with fear and apprehension, you and I can enjoy divine immunity. We can be spared the stress and anxiety that the unbelieving world must suffer because we know that we have

already won. Through faith in Jesus Christ we are already heirs of eternal life. You therefore have the tools, the God-given power and ability *right now and no matter what your situation*, to see through, past, around both life's material prosperity and success, and life's failures and frustrations. As Christians, God has given you that gift, that ability. Use it. Daily. Man can do nothing to save himself. God, in Christ, has already done that for us. Human beings can, however, deal with the distractions that threaten our souls. Clear away those distractions, greet each morning with thanksgiving, focus on the one thing needful, and then know that as far as you are concerned, the devil doesn't stand a chance. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Isaiah 25:7-9** And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. ⁸ He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. ⁹ ¶ It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

^{ESV} **Matthew 22:1-14** And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, ² "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, ³ and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. ⁴ Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.' ⁵ But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶ while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. ⁷ The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. ⁸ Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹ Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.' ¹⁰ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests. ¹¹ ¶ "But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. ¹² And he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. ¹³ Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹⁴ For many are called, but few are chosen."

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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The 19th Sunday after Pentecost – October 11, 2020

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 786 (Brown Hymnal)

"Take My Life and Let It Be"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Isaiah 25:7-9) Christians can best appreciate certain Scripture readings only during difficult times. Perhaps that is part of the reason our God allows difficult times for His children. What a comfort to know that the final outcome is victory and eternal life with our God – always and alone by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. God grant us such grace during the difficult times to remember that his love never fails.

Psalm 66 (Supplement page 37) (Read responsively)

The New Testament Lesson: (Matthew 22:1-14) In this parable Jesus teaches us how foolish it is to ignore that one thing needful for the sake of something here on this earth. The "wedding feast" mentioned here is a picture of heaven. All want to attend, but only those who are dressed in the robe of Christ's perfection will be allowed to enter. That robe of perfection is the personal and constant possession of faith and forgiveness for all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and their Savior.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 742 (Brown Hymnal)

"Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven"

The Sermon – Text: Philippians 4:4-13 (Printed on the back page)

"God Clears Distractions"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 310 (Stanzas 1-3) (Red Hymnal)

"Thy Table I Approach"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 798 (Stanzas 1 & 4) (Brown Hymnal)

"God, We Praise You"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking Holy Communion** – In obedience to God's Word, we practice "Close Communion." This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting anyone to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word, not in judgment of anyone's Christian faith.

Attendance – Sunday (24) Average (30)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Tuesday	-7:00 p.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Both the dual parish of Bowdle - Ipswich and Morris have called Jonathan Schnose (received through colloquy in September) as resident vacancy pastor. Pastor Todd Ohlmann has returned the call to Living Savior of Eden Prairie. Nominations are open to fill the position of Prof. John Reim, who has announced his retirement from the faculty of ILC at the end of the 2020-2021 school year.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet on Tuesday. Please bring discussion items to the attention of Pres. Mark Johnson or to one of the other Council members.

CLC Financial and Coordinating Council Summaries – Both a summary of the current financial position of the CLC and a summary of the September Coordinating Council are available on the entry table. It is important that we familiarize ourselves with the work that the CLC is doing in our name both nationally and internationally.