

"Focus"

Text: Philippians 3:17-4:1

May the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ lead you to contemplate and appreciate the priceless gift that he thereby earned for you – the forgiveness of your sins and Eternal Life in heaven. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Have you ever wondered why the custom of most Christians is to fold our hands, close our eyes, and bow our heads when we pray? We bow our heads as a sign of humility and reverence, but folding our hands and closing our eyes have to do with something else entirely. The human brain, as amazing as it is, has an interesting limitation: it can only focus on one thing at a time. This is true across all senses. If you are focused on what you are looking at, your brain cannot simultaneously process what you are hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching. It can shift in an instant from one focal point to another, but can only truly focus on one thing at a time. Even our thoughts are limited to one thing at a time. You can prove all of this to yourself in a variety of ways. If your eyes focus on any particular point, you have peripheral vision, but your brain can only utilize that peripheral information if it shifts its attention to it. Once you shift your attention to what you are seeing only peripherally, you cannot simultaneously concentrate on whatever your eyes are actually focusing on. If someone asks you to taste something, the entire focus of your brain is limited to what you are tasting. All of the rest of your senses shift to the background. Same with hearing, smelling, touching, and even thinking. Again, the brain can shift instantly from one sensory focus to another, but never simultaneously. Someone who claims to be good at multi-tasking can't focus on any two things at once, they are just comfortable shifting focus continually. We fold our hands and close our eyes when we pray, therefore, to reduce distractions and to help our minds to actually focus on the thoughts of our prayers.

For most of us, nothing tends to demand more attention than what we see. During most of our waking hours, visual stimuli suck all of the oxygen out of the room. The brain tends to be preoccupied with visual data – which is why nearly everyone finds it harder to focus on their prayers with their eyes open. It's just too difficult to keep visual distractions from competing for the brain's attention.

The One who made us is obviously well aware of this limitation, which is undoubtedly why we find so many references in God's Word to the need to properly direct our focus or attention. Understanding this universal

characteristic or limitation is important, since it can be made to work for us, or it can and will be used against us.

Our text for this morning is one of the many examples where our God instructs us not only to direct our focus, but where. That text is found in Paul's Letter to the Philippians, beginning in the Third Chapter:

ESV Philippians 3:17 - 4:1 *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. ¹ Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.*

This is God's Word. Here – when dealing with the Word of God – we never need to be on our guard or skeptical, for here we have only truth and light. Focusing intently on God's Word can only therefore produce positive results. That our God would today guide and strengthen us as we direct our focus to these words, so we pray: **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

The Apostle Paul introduces the concept of controlling or directing our focus with these words in our text: **Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.** To **"keep your eyes on"** is another way of telling us to focus, to pay attention to. Those on whom we are *not* to focus are also here identified as those who **"walk as enemies of the cross of Christ"** and as those whose **"end is destruction, their god is their belly, and who glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things."** This distinction is not always easily identifiable, which is why we need to dig a little deeper into the identification process, to focus more intently.

The growing distances and speed at which modern warfare is waged presented the military with a unique problem: *How to identify friend from foe without being able to actually see them.* The military accomplishes that now with coded electronic signaling, which is obviously not available for Christians. Yet we too need to differentiate friend from foe if we are to actually carry out what we are instructed in

our text to do – which is to focus on good, positive examples, while avoiding those who **“walk as enemies of the cross of Christ”**. Who exactly are, in other words, those that our God identifies as **“enemies of the cross of Christ”**?

“Enemies of the cross of Christ” refers, at least in part, to unbelievers. We know that to be true because our text goes on to define them as those whose **“end is destruction.”** The end of every believer is life eternal, not destruction. Unfortunately it is more complicated than that, which is undoubtedly why God in our text offers additional information: **“their god is their belly, and who glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”** This is obviously critical information because it further fine-tunes our ability to differentiate between those on whom we should focus and imitate and those we should not.

God alone knows who is a Christian and who is not. We are never asked to try to determine that, but we *are* told to evaluate both an individual’s confession and his actions. Those we can and must “judge.” Christians, for example, can be “belly-servers.” What exactly does that mean?

Our culture understands the phrase “belly-server” much differently than did the people of Paul’s day, and therefore differently than God himself intended. The Jews understood “the belly” not so much as the seat of gluttony and indulgence but as the seat of emotion. A “belly-server” is therefore not someone that indulges the desires of the flesh but *someone that is guided by emotions and feelings, rather than by God’s Word*. The expressions *“go with your gut”* and *“listen to your heart”* actually provide us with a more accurate understanding of what God is here referring to. Can Christians act as “belly-servers”? Absolutely. The Bible is full of examples of that very thing. When Peter tried to prevent Jesus from going to Jerusalem to pay man’s sin-debt, he was a “belly-server” in that he was allowing himself to be guided by his feelings and emotions, rather than by the Word and will of God. In his rebuke, Jesus not only said, **“Get behind me Satan”** (an indication that he didn’t want to be distracted by Peter’s bad example) but also **“You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”** That’s “belly-service,” and that obviously does not represent an example on which we are supposed to focus, or as that which we are to imitate.

This also helps us to understand why God the Holy Spirit added Romans 16:18 after his command in 16:17. After telling us in verse 17 to **“mark and avoid”** (to cut ourselves off from) every false teacher, he went on to identify false teachers as those who **“serve their own belly.”** Once we recognize **“belly”** as the seat of emotion and feelings, it becomes obvious

why God wants us to cut ourselves off from anyone and everyone who is guided by emotions and feelings, rather than by the Word of God alone.

Our text goes on to identify those that we are not to imitate as **“those who glory in their shame.”** The Godless obviously do this, but *only* the Godless? Can or do *Christians* ever **“glory in their shame”**? Most Christians have probably not only seen it in others but have done it themselves. We do it every time we laugh at, or even brag about, past sins – how much we drank or partied, how fast we drove, the premarital exploits of our youth, the hurtful “pranks” we pulled, etc. Should Christians brag about the very things that make us bad examples that are to be avoided?

Like the Godless, can the minds of *Christians* at times be **“set on earthly things”**? Embarrassingly often. Even Jesus’ own Apostles were guilty of this when they argued about who would be the greatest in the earthly kingdom they anticipated from Jesus. All of this serves as divine training on the proper identification of that on which our God instructs us to focus. While it should be as simple as *“focus on and imitate fellow Christians,”* it is, unfortunately, not. Our first prayer then is this: *“Heavenly Father, by your grace and power make me, in every conceivable way, a better example.”*

Why, again, is the whole concept of directing the Christian’s focus so important? Why does our God, in his Word, emphasize this in so many different ways, with so many different examples, and with so many different words? It is because our God knows that we can focus on only one thing at a time, and when we are focused on that which is good and beneficial, we are not then being influenced or led by that which is evil.

When you search God’s Word with this in mind, it is both remarkable and telling how often and in how many different ways our Lord emphasizes this truth. Consider just a few of the near-countless examples from God’s Word:

^{ESV}(**Psalm 1:1-2**) ***Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; ² but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.***

^{ESV}(**Psalm 145:5**) ***On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.***

^{ESV}(Luke 10:41-42) *But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."*

^{GWN}(Hebrews 12:2) *We must focus on Jesus, the source and goal of our faith. He saw the joy ahead of him, so he endured death on the cross and ignored the disgrace it brought him. Then he received the highest position in heaven, the one next to the throne of God.*

^{ESV}(Philippians 4:8-9) *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.*

This is, again, just a sampling, but it is more than enough to teach us just how important this is to God, and therefore also how important it should be to each of us. We have a merciful, loving God. A God that does not want us to suffer, struggle, or fail. He has promised to never allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to endure (1 Corinthians 10:13) and has promised to provide avenues of escape. *This is one of those escape routes.* Limiting our focus to that which is good, pure, and exemplary will allow us to avoid a myriad of untold temptations, and thereby also untold harm.

Yet, as in all things, this grace, wisdom, and blessing from our God can only benefit us if we actually use it, if we actually do what he here instructs.

Finally, don't rob yourself of the last point of focus identified and encouraged in our text: *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. ¹ Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.* The last focal point is not just Jesus, but Jesus returning in power and glory on the Last Day – the Jesus who will then *"transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body."* How much fear, frustration, and anxiety we will be spared if these sublime promises remain our focus. Amen.

ESV **Jeremiah 26:8-15** And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the LORD had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, "You shall die! ⁹ Why have you prophesied in the name of the LORD, saying, 'This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant?'" And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the LORD. ¹⁰ ¶ When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king's house to the house of the LORD and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of the LORD. ¹¹ Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, "This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears." ¹² ¶ Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, "The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. ¹³ Now therefore mend your ways and your deeds, and obey the voice of the LORD your God, and the LORD will relent of the disaster that he has pronounced against you. ¹⁴ But as for me, behold, I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. ¹⁵ Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears."

ESV **Luke 13:31-35** At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³² And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. ³³ Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.' ³⁴ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! ³⁵ Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

ESV **Philippians 3:17- 4:1** Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. ¹ Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.



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The Second Sunday in Lent – March 13, 2022

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 156 (Red Hymnal)

"Not All the Blood of Beasts"

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

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

The First Lesson: (Jeremiah 26:8-15) Speaking God's Word faithfully has always involved a risk. The first is that man might hear and reject the path to life. The second danger is that those who reject the message then vent their rage and frustration upon those who brought them God's Word. Note that both of these dangers lie outside of our control. The same One who called us to speak has also promised to protect us and to bless our witness.

Psalms 51 (Page 28) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (Luke 13:31-35) Hundreds of years after Jeremiah spoke the words of our Old Testament lesson, the Jews still had not learned their lesson. They still refused to hear the words of those sent by God. Their rejection, finally, of the Son of God himself sealed their doom. Be aware, however, that we today share the unbeliever's natural tendency to reject that which we don't want to hear. We too need to be open to the correction that God offers in His Word, and through the Word brought by fellow Christians.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – revised (On Screens only)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 141 (Red Hymnal)

"Enslaved by Sin and Bound in Chains"

The Sermon – Text: Philippians 3:17-4:1 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Focus"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 145 (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus, Refuge of the Weary"

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 – 47 (Red Hymnal)

"Savior, Again to Thy Dear Name We Raise"

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) Wednesday (21)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting
Wednesday	-5:45 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Lenten Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor Aaron Ude has returned the call to Immanuel of Winter Haven. Teacher Claire Abbas is considering the call to Berea School of Inver Grove Heights. Mrs. Dawn Mayhew has accepted the call to Redeemer School of Cheyenne. Mrs. Becky Buck has accepted the call to Messiah School of Eau Claire. Redeemer of Bowdle and Zion of Ipswich have applied for a seminary graduate. Grace School of Sleepy Eye has called Teacher Debra Mayhew.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet during the fellowship hour this morning.

Lenten Schedule – Our Lenten Schedule continues this week, with Confirmation moving to a 5:45pm start time, followed by our Midweek Lenten service at 7:00pm. Please don't hesitate to ask for a ride, if that is all that is preventing you from attending. There are many members who are willing and able to help.