

THE 18th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
PHILIPPIANS 1:18-27

September 18, 2005

- Grace and mercy and peace are yours from God the Father through his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.
- God's Word for our meditation and spiritual growth, made possible by the power of God the Holy Spirit, is found in our Epistle Reading for this day.
- Listen now to the words of St. Paul to the Philippian Congregation, chapter 1, verse 18 and following:

The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. ²⁷Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.

LET US PRAY: Lord, open now my heart to hear,
 And through your Word to me draw near.
 Let me your Word e'er pure retain;
 Let me your child and heir remain. AMEN.

Dear followers of our risen and victorious Savior and Lord,

Numerous one-liners and sayings abound. Many of which serve as great gems of advice for living.

Take for example, "A penny saved is a penny earned."

Such a human saying can even serve as wise sage advice for us Christians. We need to be cautious that we are not wasting the God given resources he has entrusted to us. Indeed, all things entrusted to us are to be used for his glory.

Again, "Patience is a virtue."

Such a saying is well suited for any one of us, whether a child, a parent or an employee or employer. We need to exercise patience in dealing with people, now matter what their talent or skill level may be.

Also, "Don't count your chickens before they'er hatched".

Certainly such a statement reminds us not to bank and trust in the uncertainties of tomorrow. Whether we are dealing with life after High School and College, or dealing with some anticipated promotion or profit, nothing concerning our personal gain is for certain. Don't count your chickens before they'er hatched.

Or “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Some people in their shallow form of religion have presumed that such a golden rule for life is all that we need to know. While we will want to treat others kindly and decently, our motivation should be to glorify and serve our Savior God, and not because that is how we would eventually want to be treated.

Our text presents a higher and loftier set of words to remember and to use in shaping the attitudes of this life. Today, Saint Paul holds out a saying of words to live by. Yet these words, which may often be heard at a funeral or used at the bedside of the dying, are equally appropriate for the living. “To live is Christ, to die is gain.” Yes indeed, these are wise words to remember. 1. These are words to live by. 2. These are words to die by.

1.

One of the commentary authors, that offer a study of these words found in our text, makes a noteworthy characterization of Paul’s attitude and demeanor clearly displayed throughout this brief letter to the Philippians. Professor R. Lenski writes, “Joy is the music that runs through this epistle, the sunshine that spreads over all of it. The whole epistle radiates joy and happiness.”

Bear in mind that the inspired author, Paul, wrote these words as a prisoner in Rome. Some would note that he was only under house arrest. Yet he still had to spend his fair amount of time in the stockades and in chains. Note these words of Paul that precede our text, “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly” (Philippians 1:12-14).

Back to the notion that he was just under house arrest, we may think of a celebrity who recently had to serve her time in this way, namely Martha Stewart. In no way has she been quoted as saying that she maintained great joy while serving her time in this way. For the vast majority, such an ordeal is not a pleasant experience. It always involves the forced restraint of freedoms and liberties. Yet our text holds out Saint Paul’s unmitigated and overflowing joy and happiness. Paul found great comfort and contentment in the loving control of his Lord and Savior. Even during that particular time when he was kept from preaching and teaching, the congregations were being emboldened in their faith. For now they saw that Saint Paul was not in the ministry to advance his own personal agenda or to draw fame and attention to himself. He was never in it for the money. He started all of those congregations throughout the Mediterranean World to spread forth God’s Kingdom of Grace.

This was an added source of Paul’s joy. Such joy for Paul, was found nowhere else other than in the Gospel. Yes it appears that Paul was about to escape his brush with death, as he is appealing his case before the Roman Emperor. But Paul, throughout his ministry, always recalled his brush with eternal death. He realized that back when he was out to kill and imprison Christians, God was intent on making Paul alive in the faith. He realized that before he stepped onto that road to Damascus to hunt down those who followed Christ, Paul was already on a road to hell. By the spectacular miracle of

conversion, God had now set him on a course for heaven. Even death could not rob him of God's ultimate gift and prize. Such a reward in Christ is not in any way the consolation prize, it is the grand prize – forever with Jesus in his heaven. So nothing could shake him or restrain him from holding on to Christ. Even his imprisonment was really small potatoes and a minor problem in comparison to the judgment from God that he really deserved.

This same life that you and I live is God's gift to us, to use by showing Christ in what we do and to share Christ in what we say. Our text says it all, "To live is Christ". On another occasion in his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship." (Romans 12:1). Our God establishes this same joy within our hearts by making his home in our hearts. He urges us on, by telling us daily, that although we sin much his grace and love abounds. He reminds us that there is not a sin Jesus did not die for. Consider how God has communicated his crystal clear commands for this life, thus convicting us of sin before we even leave our homes in the morning. But then he also quickly comforts us with full and free forgiveness in Christ. His life and his death on Calvary's cross have been credited to us. We are, by God's grace, redeemed blood-bought children of God.

While doing some printing and prep work yesterday, for the Sunday morning Bible Class, Your pastor watched a brief portion of a college football game. It was the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame versus the Spartans of Michigan State. The sport's commentator made a point of speaking about Charlie Weis, the first year coach for Notre Dame. As that coach prepared for this past Saturday's game, he had the team watch the movie Rudy. And then had the real Rudy Ruettiger speak to the team. Rudy (you may know) was a walk-on football player for the Notre Dame team in 1978. He was a mere 5foot 6 and 165 pounds. As a senior he was given the chance to suit up for the final season game and then got to play in the final 13 seconds of the game. It is a moving story of how strong determination really pays off and can pan out into making ones dreams come true. Well, his recent appearance before the Notre Dame team was to push the team to ultimate victory. In a bitter overtime struggle the team ended up losing by a field goal.

Think about how God accomplishes so much more for us today and everyday. What does God give you to know and gain ultimate victory?

He gives you his Son.

- In Holy Communion.
- In Holy Baptism.
- From the Holy Bible, Jesus makes his appearance to us in everyday life.

This is truly a higher source of power and confidence in convincing us of our complete victory over sin, death and hell. This is a far more significant victory than any kind of victory on a football field. Jesus' victory is truly our victory. Our shared joy is further expressed and experienced within this fellowship of believers. Paul cherished this fact in our text and in verses prior to our text. For he wrote, "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:3-6).

2.

This partnership that we have here at St. Mark's manifests itself in our worship today. But it fully shows itself as we together, as a single unit, reach out into this community with the message of Christ. That is what it means to say, "To live is Christ". We are but a beachhead for marching out into this community with that full saving message, "To live is Christ to die is gain".

With the absolute certainty of eventual death, since "The wages of sin is death", we need to ponder regularly the impact and importance of Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday. Consider Saint Paul's words to the Corinthian congregation in chapter 15 of his 1st letter to them. This often times is known as the Great Resurrection Chapter of the Bible.

In this section of Scripture, Saint Paul holds out the irrefutable truth of Jesus' bodily resurrection from the grave, on Easter Sunday.

1. The Disciples had to be convinced before they would tell others of Jesus' rising on Easter Sunday. (At first, they were all Doubting Thomas's to start with.) Therefore, their ultimate testimony of Jesus' rising was not a figment of their imagination. Jesus' rising from the grave is an absolute truth and not some fairy tale.
2. The appearances of Jesus also occurred to different people in various places. We are not talking about one obscure occurrence of Jesus appearing in his resurrected form. It occurred numerous times during the 40 days between Jesus' Resurrection and his Ascension.
3. In the early verses of that Great Resurrection chapter, several references are listed as further proof. In Paul's day you could look up and find an eyewitness to testify to this historic fact. Indeed, there were 500 such witnesses.

Saint Paul would further write, "If Christ has not been raised our preaching is useless". And, "Death has been swallowed up in victory".

I have been told of a letter that some time ago was sent to our WELS Prison Ministry. It came from an inmate saying, "Please, don't send me any more of your Bible studies. I don't need them." (The woman who initially read this message was disheartened, until she read further.) For the letter continued, "I am on death row and have exhausted all my appeals. I will soon be executed. But I want to thank you and your Prison Ministry for bringing me to faith in the Jesus of the Bible. I now approach death unafraid. I know that my Redeemer lives. I am as confident as the criminal on the cross, that I will be with Jesus in paradise."

You must realize that in a certain sense, we all are on death row. While we do not have a known date of execution, we nonetheless will be taken from this veil of tears at God's appointed time. Be ready and be unafraid. Because Jesus lives we too will live. Rejoice. Saint Paul did so, even in the midst of his uncertain days in prison. His words for us are truly wise words worth remembering. "To live is Christ, to die is gain". Indeed, these are words to live by, and these are words to die by. AMEN.