

"Better"

Text: 1 John 3:1-7

Grace, mercy and peace be multiplied to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

If you could have just one thing in this life, what would it be?

My guess is that you would have answered that question dozens of different ways throughout the various stages in your life. Life has a way of magnifying the needs of the present. You've probably heard a child pleading with a parent, *"If you just let me have this I will never ask for another thing as long as I live."* It can be just about anything – a dog, a bike, a car, a stereo – whatever captures the imagination at that particular moment. The reality is that sort of thing, that sort of longing, never ends. There will always be something else, something more, something more urgently "needed." There will always be something that suddenly seems *better* in your eyes.

The great irony here is that you and I already have that one thing – quite literally the best that this life could possibly offer. Perhaps even more amazing is that that best thing is yours forever.

We hear just what that "best thing" is in our text for this morning, found in the Epistle of First John, the third chapter:

^{ESV} **1 John 3:1-7** *See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. ⁴ ¶ Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵ You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶ No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.*

So far the very Word of God. God himself has given these words to you, and herein offers you wisdom, strength, and comfort. You are therefore

blessed each time you hear God's Word and treasure it. To that end we pray, ***"Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."*** Amen.

Did you catch the "best thing" that we already have? Hear it again: ***"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."***

Don't miss the message of these incredible words. Don't let them just "pass through" without hitting something solid. Make them a part of you – the *best* part of you. You are, according to the divinely inspired words of our text, a child of God. Our text goes on: ***Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*** Only when the full import of that truth sinks in and becomes an inseparable part of you are you ready to move on – and move on you must. The fact that you are a child of God *means* something, not just to you but to everyone with whom you come in contact. Because of what God has made us, we need to be better. Ever and always better.

There is just something about that word that is uplifting, comforting, encouraging. Life's problems don't typically get fixed all at once. The solution is most often a trend or process. "Better" says that the process is headed in the right direction.

Since you and I are children of God, we are part of a family. Part of our responsibility as members of a family is to warn each other when the trend is headed in the wrong direction – when something is getting worse instead of better. The trend we need to point out this morning is that we seem to have developed a slouch toward mediocrity in this country. Call it *"an aspiration toward average"* – which is pretty much the exact opposite of "better." This mindset is finding its way also into our churches and into our personal walk with our Lord. It seems to have started gradually, like fungus growing in dark places. Somehow it just gradually became a part of us. This *"aspiration toward average"* is the tendency to be mediocre, or just a little bit *below* average. We see the trend in the lack of any sort of depth in what comes out of Hollywood, in the grades our children are comfortable with in school or the quality of education with which their parents are comfortable. We see it in the way many employees carry out their work, and in the products companies produce. Despite the image that major corporations like to portray in their ad campaigns, the "pursuit of

excellence" has been replaced with *"do as little as possible to get by— just so long as we are still making buckets of money."*

Christians are obviously not immune. In fact Christian churches seem to have an ever increasing number of members who desire to be average or below average attendees, average or below average contributors, average or below average Bible readers, average or below average witnesses and church workers. Nor should we imagine that the problem is "out there." It is here among us. It is here within us. You and I are continually tempted to be content with dedicating only a below average portion of our lives to God and his work. It seems, in fact, that we would be happier if everyone would do a little bit less so that we, in turn, could do less – and still be average. This tendency afflicts everyone, from the pastor on up. Why?

One contributing factor is that society has lowered its expectations. When you lower your expectations, you usually get even less. So too parents expect from their children only as much as they expect from themselves. The result, again, is that they usually get less, and the trend toward mediocrity has begun. Children pick up on this message as clearly as if it were tattooed on mom and dad's foreheads. The message is that mom and dad will expect no more in conduct, propriety, and performance than they themselves produced. We say we want more for our children, and then subconsciously urge them toward less. What we then produce is a generation that goes to church less than we did, works less than we did on church work days, contributes less, pulls less than its own weight, and centers its existence less around the Word of God. Satan loves the gradual deterioration. He urges parents into the trap with guilt. *"How can you demand from your child what you did not do?" "How can you punish your child for what you got away with?" "How can you require what you were not willing to give?"*

Nor are things getting better. They are getting worse. We continue to plumb new lows. The current message is: *"Do not...and when you do..."* Examples abound: *"Do not engage in activities reserved for married people, and when you do (as we fully expect you will) use protection."* *"Do not drink when you are under age, and when you do, don't drive, and when you drive, be careful."* Children tend to pick up the message that when parents say *"Don't!"* they really mean, *"Don't let me know about it"* or *"Don't get caught."* God help us to banish such thoughts and attitudes. God called us to *better*.

But isn't this the sort of thing that John was promoting earlier in this same Letter? Isn't he condoning an attitude of mediocrity and acceptance concerning sin when he first says: ***"My dear children, I write this to you***

so that you will not sin" and then follows it almost immediately with: ***"But if anyone does sin..."***? Was he really saying, in effect, *"Don't get caught!"* or *"Try to cut down a bit on the sin thing"?*

To believe such a thing is to understand neither the gospel, nor sin, nor John, nor this Epistle, nor indeed Christianity itself. Above all it represents a profound misunderstanding of your calling and responsibility.

Christianity is about excellence in every aspect of life. It's not uncommon for non-Christians to accuse us of believing that we are better than everyone else. Hard to know how to respond to that. Maybe it's as simple as, *"Not at all, but we try to be."* Our text gives us a sense of this when it says, ***"And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure."*** In Chapter 1 of this Epistle John says, ***"This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."*** How beautifully the "disciple that Jesus loved" here phrases the distinction between good and evil - between the child of God and the child of Satan. God is light. Those who want to walk as children of God walk in the light. Darkness and light are absolutely incompatible. They cannot coexist. If something is dark, it is not light. If something is light, it is not dark. We are children of *Light!* As such it is to be expected that we want to have absolutely nothing to do with darkness. How then could we possibly read these words and imagine that John was somehow winking at sin? How could we imagine that the subtle message he was really trying to convey to us (like so many modern, permissive parents) is to go ahead and sin, but to be careful, and maybe try to cut back a bit?

John saw the terrible consequences of sin with his own eyes. He helped lower from the cross the consequences of man's sin. This too is what he spoke about earlier in this Epistle. John was an eyewitness of Jesus Christ crucified for sin - *our* sin, *all* sin. There is therefore no such thing as an unimportant sin. A terrible price had to be paid. That means that there can be no place in the Christian heart for anything less than a loathing of all that is evil and a continual striving for excellence, for better.

It is just now that you might well hear that little voice whispering in your ear, *"Yes, but I do sin. There's just no getting around that fact. And what is more, I am probably going to sin again. As much as I hate to admit it, I doubt that I can possibly live my life from this moment on*

without sinning." And then you begin to wonder, *"What does this fact tell me about myself? Does this mean that I am, because of my sins, 'of the darkness' rather than 'of the light'?"*

If that were true, then who could possibly be saved? If God's Church is not made up of sinners, who would the members be? That's also why our text speaks as it does of ***"those who make a practice of sinning."*** To make a practice of sinning is to give up and give over; to cede the battle and to abandon the struggle. To yield is a mark of unbelief. To fail, even repeatedly, in the midst of the ongoing struggle is characteristic of Christianity, but that doesn't mean "better" plays no role.

Christian excellence is not about perfect conduct; it is about the perfect payment made by Jesus Christ. It is about loathing that sin from which we were and are cleansed and battling against temptation every moment of every day we walk this earth.

John knew both the horror of sin, and he knew the payment for sin. Sin, John knew, does not now damn us. Unbelief damns us. In our text we find the proof: ***"You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin."*** That now is the standard to which we aspire – never to try to save ourselves by our works, but to live our lives like the One who *did* take away our sins by his works.

Looking continually to Jesus we now understand how darkness and light are incompatible. We simply cannot know and believe what Jesus has done and won for us, and still *want to* go on crucifying him all over again by impenitence, betrayal, or capitulation to sinful living. As Christians, the new man that we put on day by day yearns within us to walk always and only in the light. And more than that, that new creation within each Christian longs to drive out all spiritual mediocrity, weakness, and laziness and to labor with unrestrained zeal and vigor in holy service to our Savior God. We want ever better.

It is indeed a great comfort – in fact it is Life itself – to know that ***"we have One who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One!"*** God, for Jesus' sake, has forgiven our sins. That same Jesus also once said, ***"Go, and sin no more!"*** Learn to recognize in yourself the temptation toward Christian mediocrity, and to acknowledge, day by day, the tremendous evil and the eternal danger of all sin. Then look to the perfect love of our Savior - a love that moved him to sacrifice himself to wash us clean in the sight of our Heavenly Father – and be comforted, refreshed, and reenergized. Praise the God who has called us out of the darkness of sin and death and into the light of his love. Walk in

that light, and in the excellence of service that is indeed fitting for children of our Creator God. Amen.

^{ESV} **Acts 3:11-21** While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's. ¹² And when Peter saw it he addressed the people: "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? ¹³ The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. ¹⁴ But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, ¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ¹⁶ And his name-by faith in his name-has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all. ¹⁷ ¶ "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸ But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. ¹⁹ Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, ²⁰ that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, ²¹ whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.

^{ESV} **Luke 24:36-49** As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" ³⁷ But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. ³⁸ And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate before them. ⁴⁴ ¶ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

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The Second Sunday after Easter – April 18, 2021

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 4 (Red Hymnal)

"God Himself Is Present"

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

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

The First Lesson: (Acts 3:11-21) When Jesus' work on earth came to an end, the work of his disciples had just begun. While Jesus certainly paid the full penalty for sin, it was left to his followers to share this message with the world. That calling, that Great Commission, is still in force today. Listen carefully then to the words of Peter in our first lesson, for you would be hard pressed to find a better example of how to tell others about their Savior.

Psalm 85 (Supplement page 40) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (Luke 24:36-49) It is understandable that the disciples were not only *saddened* by Jesus' death, but were also greatly *confused* by that same event – and then again by his resurrection from the dead. Jesus was gracious enough, following his resurrection, to take the time to explain to them why things had to be as they had been. This is precious information indeed. We too would be wise to listen carefully this morning to these words from our Savior.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed (Brown Hymnal page 15)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 206 (Stanzas 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Jesus Christ, My Sure Defense "

The Sermon – 1 John 3:1-7 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Better"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 799 (Brown Hymnal)

"This Is the Feast of Victory for Our God"

The Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 49 (Red Hymnal)

"Almighty God, Thy Word Is Cast"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States and around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (29) Average (30)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Monday	-10:00 a.m.	– Study Conference in Bowdle
Wednesday	No Midweek Classes	
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Seminary Graduate Drew Naumann was assigned to Trinity of Spokane. He has accepted that call. Teacher graduates Katherine Naumann and Ben Hansen were assigned to Winter Haven and Okabena, respectively. Katherine Naumann has accepted her call. ILC is still in need of dorm parents for the 2021-22 school year. The 2021 CLC Men's Retreat is scheduled for September 30 – October 1 in Prairie du Chien, WI (see Pastor Roehl for additional information). The ILC Professorship Committee, which maintains faculty housing at ILC, is looking for volunteers to perform tasks of all skill levels. More information here: tinyurl.com/ipc-form-21

Pastor Out of Town – Pastor Roehl is scheduled to attend a Study Conference in Bowdle on Monday, and then to visit family from Tuesday-Saturday. There are no midweek classes scheduled for this week.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet during the fellowship hour next Sunday.

West Central Delegate Conference – Mick Johnson and Phil Pfennig have tentatively agreed to represent St Paul at the May WCDC in Valentine.