

*“Approve what is excellent.”* That's an interesting phrase that Paul uses in our Epistle lesson today. *“Approve what is excellent.”* Paul wants the people in the church back then, and now, to think carefully about what is excellent. And he connects that excellence to “the day of Christ.” To the end times.

This exhortation comes at the beginning of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Right away at the beginning of chapter one. But at the end of the letter, in chapter 4, Paul will repeat it. He'll tell us that we are to think about those things that are honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable. If there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, we are to think about those things.

This is clearly important to him. Paul wants us to think about what matters. About what matters most. What matters in the long run. What matter in the end. And I think we can agree, that's a pretty good goal. Nobody wants to reach the last day, look back on their life and say, “Wow, that was a waste of time.” Even if we do look forward to eternity with Christ, it would be nice to know that we lived a Godly life. A life of excellence. So I see where Paul's coming from.

So what is that? What is excellent? What are some examples? What counts as excellence in Paul's mind? Well, this passage right here actually gives us quite a few examples. And the first is right away in the second verse. Paul writes, *“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you.”*

Giving thanks is excellent. Just about the very first thing Paul says in this entire letter is telling the Philippians how thankful he is for them. They have supported him through thick and thin. Whether he was starting churches or in jail. They sent him gifts of money when he needed it. They held fast to Jesus even when they received threats because of their faith. This congregation partnered with him in the Gospel. Paul could count on them and their love for him and their love for one another.

So Paul gave thanks for the people there when he prayed. He thanked God for the Church in Philippi because they were God's gift to him. And that thanksgiving was excellent.

Which leads us to another another excellent thing. Do you ever stop to think that we are God's gifts to one another? The church isn't like a bowling league or a political organization where we get together because we like the same things. No, God has brought us together around Jesus. He has given us to one another for support and encouragement.

The church is excellent. And I don't mean the church as a 501.c3 non-profit organization. I don't mean the church as a philanthropy or a community group. I don't mean the church as this building of brick walls and a steeple.

I mean the church as the people, gathered today. To hear God's Word and receive His sacrament. And support one another as the Philippians supported Paul. And partner together in the Gospel as the Philippians partnered together with Paul. You, the church, are excellent.

So give thanks for the church God has given you. No, it's not perfect. Yes, we have flaws. Yes, we are sinners. But by the blood of Christ we are still an excellent church. And I give thanks for you.

After Paul gives thanks for the Philippian church, he writes, *“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”* That confidence that Paul had in the Philippian church was also excellent.

Why? Well, because Paul was confident the Philippians would be there at the end. The end of time, when Jesus comes back again. Paul was confident that Jesus would keep them in the faith, in the church, until that great day of resurrection. He says that Jesus began this good work in them and Jesus will finish it as well. Did you notice why Paul was so confident? It's all because of Jesus.

Paul was confident back then. Today, we are sorely lacking in confidence. Each week, churches close because of lack of members. Attendance figures are down across much of the country. In most surveys, the fastest growing group for religious affiliation is “None.” Many congregations are missing entire age groups like those in their twenties and thirties. And high school sporting events are far more important than worship.

The American church feels like it has failed. And that has shaken our confidence to the core. But this is where Paul's excellent words are so important for us. Because Paul calls for us to be confident that Jesus will bring us to completion on the Last Day. Jesus will do it. Jesus. He is our confidence. Why? Because he began the good work in us.

What happens at the baptismal font? Is it just water splashing on a crying infant? No! It's a dead body buried with Christ and then resurrected from the dead. It's an old Adam drowned in the water and a new man raised up to eternal life. It's a prodigal son welcomed back into the Father's arms. It's a lost sheep rescued by the Good Shepherd.

It's a good work done by God that is only beginning. And on the last day, Jesus will bring it to completion. He will hold on to us. He will keep us in the faith. He will come back for us and bring our bodies out of their tombs to live forever with him. Paul is confident because Jesus is behind it all.

We are confident. Not because we have a cutting edge youth program. Or a snazzy new evangelism strategy. Or a bold new mission statement. Our confidence doesn't lie in our works at all. Because, frankly, our works aren't very excellent at all. Like Paul, we are confident because Jesus is behind it all. Our confidence is excellent because Jesus is excellent.

Finally, Paul writes, *"It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent."* Of all the excellent things Paul lists, there is none more closely connected to it than love.

And it's Paul's prayer that the Philippians will abound more and more with love. Not that they aren't already loving. They are. Paul just prays that their love will abound more and more. Now, of course, love is not just some feeling you have inside.

Love, as the Bible describes it, is active. It's doing things. Love is a verb. And what does it do? Love does what benefits someone else. Love does what God wants done. Love seeks what is excellent, pure, honorable, just, commendable, lovely.

So just what does love abounding more and more look like for us? Well, what does love abounding more and more look like for God? First and foremost, it looks like sacrifice. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

God's love looks like the cross. God's love also looks like the empty tomb. It looks like resurrection from the dead. It looks like life everlasting. And it looks like what he gives us on the last day.

No more tears, no more hunger, no more pain, no more sickness and death, no more loneliness, no more fear. What does God want? What is excellent? Well, he wants a world with those attributes. That's an excellent world. And so that's what our love should strive for.

No more tears. Love wipes away tears with an embrace, a comforting word, a prayer.

No more hunger. Love gives food to those who don't have meals or money to buy what their family needs.

No more pain. Love bandages a wound, whether that's with a physical bandage or the bandage of kind words.

No more sickness and death. Love supports the sick and the frail, cares for the dying, comforts the grieving in their time of loss.

No more loneliness. Love visits, sends a card, makes a phone call.

No more fear. Love protects even when it may put you in danger.

Love matters. Love is excellent. Love counts at the end. Because our love for each other reflects the love that our Lord has for us. A love that washes us clean and makes us pure and blameless at his coming. A love that fills our lives with the fruits of his righteousness. A love that grants sinners like us the privilege of giving him glory and praise. Amen.