

Doing What Matters Most

St. Mark Lutheran
Three services

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Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God in all remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to the day of completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And 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, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. Philippians 1:2-11

"Approve what is excellent..." is one phrase out of our Epistle reading from Philippians this morning. Paul wrote this to the Philippians because he wanted the church back then-and now-to think carefully about what is excellent, about what matters most in the long run. I think it is worth mentioning that at the end of this letter, three chapters later, Paul says this: "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." (Phil. 4:8)

So both at the beginning and at the end of his letter Paul exhorts us to approve what is excellent. So what is that? What counts as excellent in the long run?

This morning, I brought some rocks to remind me of what is excellent. (*Hold up the first rock*) This first rock has "thanksgiving" written on one side, and on the other side is the word "church". Giving thanks, for people in the church, is excellent. Paul starts the letter by telling the Philippians how thankful he is for them. He loved the people in his church. They supported him whether he was starting churches or in jail. They sent him gifts of money when he needed it. They held fast to Jesus and the truth when threatened because of their faith. This congregation partnered with Paul in bringing the good news of the salvation Jesus brought to the world. Paul could count on them and their love for him and 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.

Did you ever stop to think, that in the church, we are God's gifts to one another? The church is not like a bowling league or some political organization. No. They have their place, but the church is different. God has brought us together around Jesus. He has given us to one another to support and encourage each other.

What is excellent? What really counts? What matters most in the long run? One thing is, giving thanks for one another in the church, because we are God's gifts for others. *(Put first rock in large jar. Tell people the jar symbolizes our life, and each rock stands for something in our life that should be very important.)*

We have a second rock here. *(Hold second rock up.)* It has the word "confidence" written on one side. On the other side is the word "Jesus". Paul was confident that the Philippians would be there at the end, on the Day of Jesus Christ. Jesus would hold on to them until the end of time. He would keep them in the faith, in the church, until the day of resurrection. He says that Jesus had begun this good work in them, and Jesus would finish it as well. Why was Paul so confident? Was it because of them? No, his confidence was in Jesus.

Today, some people may wonder. Each week churches close because of lack of members. Attendance figures are down across much of the country. In some surveys, the fastest growing group for religious affiliation is "None". Islam is growing. ISIS is growing, right here in the United States. Many congregations are missing entire age groups in their twenties and thirties. Going to sporting events has become more important than worship. For many people, doing anything is more important than worship!

God does not want us to be discouraged. In John 16:33 Jesus said this, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." These are words for a Christian to live by.

God want us to do the work he has for us and place our confidence in him. We don't really change lives by telling people what they are doing wrong. We change lives by sharing God's Word. We pray for God to guide us in using it. Sometimes we may need to get back to the basics. Listen to these wonderful words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." What happens? The Holy Scriptures tells us in Acts that we receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Scriptures tell us in Galatians that one who has been baptized has put on Christ. We understand that to mean that such a person is covered with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The Holy Scriptures tell us that our sins have been washed away. One way to help those wandering is to remind them of what God has done for them, and that he is calling them to follow him. Center your talk and your witness about what Jesus has done and can do for them, not around what they are doing wrong. if they are not spiritually feeding on their own, then you need to find ways to spoon feed them. There are ways. Trust in Jesus to bring it to completion and keep them in the faith. Pray without ceasing. *(Put the second rock in the glass jar.)*

(Pick up third rock.) The third rock for what is excellent is "love". The word on the other side is "others". The Apostle Paul prayed that the Philippians would abound more and more with love. It's not that they were not loving. They were. Paul just prays that their love will abound more and more.

Now remember, love is not just some feeling you have inside. Love, as the Bible sees it for a Christian, is active. It's doing things. Love is a verb. Love does what benefits someone else. Love does what God wants done. Love wipes away tears with an embrace or a comforting word, as we saw on TV after the terrible attack in California last week. Love prays for others, even people we may not be comfortable with, even our enemies. Love gives food to those who have no meals to eat. Love visits the lonely, sends cards, makes a phone call. Love matters. Love is excellent. Love counts at the end. (*Put third rock in glass jar.*)

So where's the problem? It is with the word "doing", the first word of our title for this message. So many people say they are too busy. They don't have time for church. They don't have time to spend with Jesus. They don't have time for other people.

I remember a demonstration once on how best to use your time. It involved a jar like this—one filled with rocks. The bigger rocks are what matter most. Now can you put anything else in the jar? Yes, you can. You can fill it with smaller stones or gravel. These stand for things in our life that are important to us but not as important as the big things. Then would the jar be full? No, there would still be some room in the jar. We could still fill it with a lot of sand. The sand stands for things that are even less important, but probably things that we like. There is still a lot of room in our jar, or in our life, for them, isn't there?

But what if we fill the jar, our life, the wrong way? Many people fill it first with sand. Then what happens? There is no room for the large rocks, for the real important things. We can't even get much gravel in the jar. It represents an unproductive life.

Paul tells us in our epistle reading today to approve what is excellent. He wants us first to fill our life with thanks to God for other people in his church, to have confidence in Jesus, and to show love for others. If we follow his advice, we will be blessed. Amen.