

Philippians 1:9-11 In Pursuit of Excellent Fruit

Last week we saw that the church in Philippi had been sticking with Paul through thick and thin. Whether things were going well for him or he was being strung up with chains and beaten in prison, they remained committed to him, we said they were “faithful in their fellowship with him.”

And as a result, BECAUSE they have been through hard times together, BECAUSE they have proven their commitment to him and to the gospel, they hold a special place in Paul’s heart and he told them he “always gives thanks for them.”

This morning he continues on, saying that he prays that God would increase their love even more. Now, make sure you see that: Paul prayed for a church that was *already demonstrating love* to increase their love **because** the Christian life should be characterized by progress, not simply maintenance.

God begins a good work in us at the moment of our salvation, when we are justified. But then we also begin the long road of sanctification – learning how to live this new life for Him, in the day-to-day moments of life. It’s this sanctification that Paul has in mind in verses 9-11.

[9](#) And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, [10](#) that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, [11](#) being filled with the fruits of righteousness which *are* by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Now, that’s a little convoluted – it’s a 59-word sentence, and it’s kind of complex. But if I can break it down for you, here’s what Paul is saying – he’s praying that the Philippians would show more and more love to the glory and praise of God. Everything else he says relates to how that plays out. But that’s the bottom line – that their love would abound, and therefore they would bring God the worship that He deserves.

Alright, sounds like a plan. But how is it going to happen? I don’t think there are many people in here who would say, “no, I’m good where I am. I’ve got this love thing down, I’m doing alright.” Not many who would say, “I always choose the right thing, I always know what to do.” So most of us could use some help answering the question, *how* am I going to get better at showing love?

Fortunately, Paul answers that question and his answer is the focal point of these verses. He says **the key to growing in love is approving what is excellent**. If you want to be the kind of person who is showing more love to God and more love to others, you need to approve what is excellent.

Not what is good, what is OK, or what is all right, but what is *excellent*. You need the ability to judge between what's best, and what is second best. And it's not always that easy to do. Our lives are filled with **obstacles to improving what is excellent**. I'll give you a few that maybe you haven't quite been able to put your finger on or maybe you're already very familiar with.

Obstacle #1 – We have too many opportunities. Certainly the Philippians had opportunities and options too, remember, they were a Roman colony where the economy was good. You had a bunch of retired military guys living there, the city made a lot of money off of their gold and copper mines, and you had people in the church like Lydia who Acts 16 describes as a seller of purple – purple was a VERY difficult color to make and only the wealthiest people in the empire could afford it.

But the *average* person sitting in this room lives a much more comfortable and controlled life than the average Philippian, and we have far more opportunities. For example, one of the things that really stood out to me after spending time among refugees in Africa and then returning home was the realization that while they were wondering *if* they were going to eat that night I was frustrated trying to figure out *where* I was going to eat. I don't feel like Italian, I don't want a sandwich, I had Mexican last night, what about Thai? Having too many options made it hard to choose and was a surreal "problem" in light of where I just been.

I'll give you a different example: I spent the summer of 2007 working with incoming cadets at the Air Force Academy and I did a whole lot of counseling with young men and women who were trying to figure out whether they had made the right choice – they had the opportunity to go to Stanford or the Academy and they chose the Academy. Or University of Florida and they choose the Academy. They had had several opportunities and were struggling, especially during those first few miserable days and weeks, wondering whether they had chosen what was excellent from among the available options.

And what about you all – new opportunities come up all the time, new offers, new positions, new assignments. Which are worth pursuing, which are worth spending your life on? Which will bring God glory and praise? How will you approve what is excellent?

Obstacle #2 – We hear too many voices.

The technologies we have enable too many people to put too much information in front of our faces too often. How do you sift through it all and determine what is excellent, what is worthy of attention?

In 2010 there were an estimated 2.9 billion email accounts worldwide.

The typical corporate user sent and received about 110 messages daily – about 2/3rds of those were received, and one third were sent. Roughly 18% of emails received is spam, comprising both actual spam and "graymail" (i.e. unwanted newsletters, alerts, etc.).

And then there's texting.

According to a NY Times article in 2009 – teens were sending avg of 80 text msgs a day.¹ By 2011 that was up to 110 per day for those in the 18-24 year old bracket according to research by the Pew Internet project. The average for all cell phone users, regardless of age, is 42 per day.²

Some of you check your texts, email, Google, or who knows what else, even while you sit here in church because you're just trying to keep up. I know some of you have hundreds, even thousands of unread emails. You just can't read everything that is sent to you and because we have "technology" now, you're told you don't need a secretary and you're expected to take care of everything on your own. So, you do the best you can to prioritize and you live with the fact that some things just aren't going to receive any attention.

But even the stuff which gets our attention often only wants to yank us around on a emotional roller coaster getting us all fired up about, or provoking an opinion in us about something we'll never affect, vote on, or have any real tangible connection with.

The problem isn't new; it's just that it's gotten worse. CS Lewis wrote back in 1961 about the declining habits of readers: "The most unlitrary reader of all sticks to 'the news'. He reads daily, with unwearied relish, how, in some place he has never seen, under circumstances which never become quite clear, someone he doesn't know has married, rescued, robbed, raped, or murdered someone else he doesn't know."³

What's made it worse is that nowadays you can forward that on to your friends and take up their time with it as well, or scroll down and "join the conversation" in the comments.

Sometimes it is worth doing, but most of the time it isn't. Which is which? Which is excellent?

Obstacle #3 – We're distracted by what is good or good enough, especially when it is easier to accomplish than that which is excellent.

BECAUSE we have so much to do, BECAUSE there is so much to filter through, we follow after things that come a little more easily or are more fun. Not things that are harmful, wrong, or detrimental, just things that aren't as valuable.

And so, instead of reading to my kids, I let them watch a video for a little longer because it's just easier than wrestling them all together to sit down and listen. Instead of doing my devotions, I check my emails to see if anything important came in over night, and tell

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/26/health/26teen.html>

² http://www.businessinsider.com/18-24-texting-2011-9?nr_email_referer=1

³ *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961), "The Reading of the Unlitrary"

myself that as soon I'm done I'll spend some time in the Word and in prayer. But while I'm checking my emails, and Facebook, and Twitter feeds, I get distracted by a link someone sent me and the next thing you know it's time to go and I never got around to doing what was excellent.

So, how am I supposed to clear these obstacles and others? **How am I supposed to approve what is excellent?** What is going to be my filter for sorting out all the possibilities and opportunities so I can know what is excellent?

First, understand the question. How do I *approve* what is excellent? The word *approve* in the Greek has the sense of testing, examining, or scrutinizing something. In other words, it's not always a "no-brainer." Sometimes you really have to spend some time thinking about the issue. So just because the situation is difficult, or complex, just because the answer isn't immediately clear or obvious, that doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. Very few men buy the first engagement ring they see without doing some research first, right? You want to spend time on important issues so can you approve what is excellent.

And then, remember the outcome – increased love, to the glory and praise of God.

But remember what love is. Most people define love in romantic or emotional terms. It's this thing where the girl holds on to the guy, looks up at him, and maybe her leg kicks back a little bit. Or where the dad holds his little baby and gently tickles the child with his finger. It's described as, "Something inside compelled me and I just let myself go with it." That's not what the Bible has in mind when it talks about love.

Last year we did an in-depth study on how God defines love. We looked at what Jesus said was the greatest commandment – to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and with all your strength and to love your neighbor as your self. And we learned that what God has in mind is something much more intentional than accidental – love isn't just something that sneaks up on you, it's a choice you make to serve someone, even at, or especially at, your own expense. Love involves sacrifice.

Love involves putting yourself out for the sake of someone else. It's taking the number two position so you can make them number one. And it's hard. But Biblical love has more than internal shivers, it has external evidence. It has proof you can point to, it has fruit. Remember Romans 5:8 "God shows His love for us in this: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God's love took action that benefited us. When we show that kind of love, we fulfill the purpose that Paul had in mind – and we bring glory and praise to God.

So that's another way we could phrase the question as we try to determine what is excellent. When we are faced with an opportunity, we must ask, in the big as well as the small stuff of life, *will this be pleasing to God?* Is this something He will praise me for, or is this something I will have to ask forgiveness for? Or, will this be a waste of an opportunity or resource that I could have used better?

Paul says two things will help us find the answer, and he identifies them in verse 9: knowledge and discernment.

First, knowledge. Increasing in your knowledge of Jesus and of the Scriptures will often help you narrow down your options. God clearly says that boasting, lying and cheating are wrong, so any option that includes those behaviors cannot earn the rating of excellent. Laziness is out, as is lust, wrath, coveting, drunkenness, selfishness, and others. Any option that could be characterized by these motives or outcomes is out. So, sometimes, just knowing what the Bible has to say will make the situation clear. And the more of it you allow to govern your choices, the more pleasing you will be to God. The more you get to know the Scriptures through your own reading and through good Bible centered teaching and preaching, the better you'll be able to make decisions about what is excellent.

But not all cases are clear-cut – the Bible doesn't address every situation you face in straightforward terms. You have a good job here, but you've also had an offer of a good job over there, which one do you take? You're about to graduate. Do you stick around for a Master's or head out into the workforce? Should you have another child? Here is where you need discernment – the ability to see the best option, the most excellent option, among a field of options where several choices seem viable. Or, to see your way out of a situation that looks unsolvable.

We might also call it wisdom. The book of Proverbs is full of verses that talk about the value of wisdom. I'll give you three sources of it.

- **Maturity.** The more you know and the more you have experienced, the better you get at discerning the best course of action. The Bible has a lot of good things to say about growing older and the wisdom that should come with the process. Those of us who are growing older should never despise that process or envy the youth and all of us should have an open ear to those who older and more experienced than us.

Technology may change the how of our lives, but it doesn't change the what and the why. No matter how many gadgets you stuff in your pockets, we're all still sons and daughters, husbands and wives, friends and employees. The true substance of life doesn't change so never be afraid to ask for insight from someone who is older than you and has walked your paths before. And for those of you who are older, think about how what you have learned still applies today. Kids text now instead of passing notes. The method may have changed, but the content hasn't – they're still talking about friends and parents and trying to figure out life on their own, so don't think your irrelevant, jump in there and help them to see what is excellent.

- Related to that is the second source of wisdom – **the counsel of others.** And I kind of jumped the gun there in explaining that, but Proverbs teaches
 - o 15:22 NKJV - Without counsel, plans go awry, But in the multitude of counselors they are established.
 - o 24:6 NKJV - For by wise counsel you will wage your own war, And in a multitude of counselors [there is] safety.

Being humble enough to ask around for input will help you approve what is excellent.

- Finally, **the third source of wisdom is God Himself**, the ultimate source of all. And according to James 1:5 - If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

God wants you to make the right choices. He isn't sitting up in Heaven watching the NCAA tournament and leaving you to figure everything out on your own. He wants you to make excellent choices. That's why He gave you the knowledge contained in Scriptures, and why He promises to guide you in every other situation as well.

But here's the deal. Because you are trying to choose what is most pleasing to God in a world that has turned away from Him, the excellent things will usually be hard. They'll require faith. They'll be found through the narrow gate, not the wide one – you won't be going the same direction as most of the people around you.

But, your life will produce a bountiful harvest – Paul says that if you approve the things that are excellent by using knowledge and discernment, you'll be sincere (pure) and without offense (blameless) till the day of Christ, **11 being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ**, to the glory and praise of God.

As you approve what is excellent, you abide in Christ – you allow God to have more and more of His way in you. Instead of constantly running away from home, you stay near your Heavenly Father's house and reflect more and more of His image. And as a result, your life produces the fruits of righteousness. You fulfill your purpose in life – to bless others and glorify God.

But one last thing – what if you have made some choices that didn't approve of what was excellent? What if you approved of the selfish? The bitter? The Mean? The Greedy? The Lazy? Repent. Tell God that you recognize that those choices were not excellent and ask for forgiveness. Then, if it's possible, ask Him to bless you by leading and strengthening you as you reverse course.

And if it's not possible – if you find yourself stuck in a situation you can't easily get out of, still repent. Call a spade a spade, admit that you got yourself into it, but invite Him into it too and He'll join you there. It might not change your situation, but it'll sure change your attitude toward it. And even better, you'll discover that He can redeem it and you can still, by submitting to Him in it, increase in love and bring him glory and praise.

Let's pray.