

*1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ; To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and servants: Grace to you, and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God whenever I remember you, always in every request of mine on behalf of you all, making my requests with joy, for your partnership in furtherance of the Good News from the first day until now; being confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. It is even right for me to think this way on behalf of all of you, because I have you in my heart, because, both in my bonds and in the defense and confirmation of the Good News, you all are partakers with me of grace. For God is my witness, how I long after all of you in the tender mercies of Christ Jesus. This I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment; so that you may approve the things that are excellent; that you may be sincere and without offense to the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (WEB)*

It is pretty easy to tell why I chose this subject for today. The motto of the Boy Scouts is “Be Prepared” and since they were originally part of the service, I thought it would be a nice way to tie it all together. But really, we all need to be prepared for many different things in our lives.

If you have a flat tire, AAA wants you to be prepared by having a membership and a cell phone.

The grocery store wants us to prepare for bad weather by buying out all the bread and milk and eggs.

When you are in school the teacher wants you to prepare for tests (some of us prepare for those really well, some not so well).

The guy who sells you insurance wants you to be prepared for illness or death. Your mother wants you to prepare for an accident by taking a bath and putting on clean underwear.

And your pastor wants you to prepare for happiness in this life and the life to come with a real and vital relationship to God.

So it seems that preparation is an important part of our lives and because of that, we often do check-ups to see if we are truly prepared.

Your insurance agent will be glad to review your coverage and your mechanic will be glad to check your car and your mother may have always asked about your underwear before you left home.

So let's take a few minutes to do a different kind of checkup based on the scripture we just read.

In the first chapter of this letter to Philippians, Paul is thankful for their faithfulness. He is thankful for the preparations they have made for this life and life eternal.

I believe that we can use Paul's description of the church of Philippi as a kind of check-up for our own personal and corporate spiritual progression. The characteristics that Paul notes and celebrates are characteristics that we should have—so maybe we can look at them and measure ourselves—checking to see what our own progress—what our own level of preparation is as individuals and as a church.

God wants us to be prepared for eternity. He wants us to be ready and able to live our lives on earth in spiritual and physical abundance. How are we doing? Let's ask Paul.

In this passage, the first major characteristic—the first thing Paul says brings joy to his heart and causes him to thank God—is found in verse five: *5for your partnership in furtherance of the Good News from the first day until now;*

Here we find PARTICIPATION in the Gospel, not just hearing of the Gospel. Not just understanding the Gospel, but participation. A relationship with God through Christ come not by just hearing but by acting—by choosing to participate in God's plan and accepting the grace of God through Christ's work.

Some of y'all know that I don't hear well anymore. Genetics play a part and not knowing the importance of wearing hearing protection played a part. Any of the rest of you have some trouble with your hearing?

Well, let's say about three of us folk with hearing difficulties are standing in the road talking. Now I don't know why we would be in the road unless our wives insisted that would be a good place for us to play—but still we can imagine. We are talking politics and global warming and you name it—in fact we are right on the verge of solving all the world's problems when a log truck rounds the curve. Since we don't hear well and since we are engaged in important business, you will probably have to yell before we hear you. When we finally DO hear you—we OUGHT to jump out of the way of that truck. But what if we hear and we understand and yet we don't jump?

SPLAT!

Just hearing and just understanding is not enough.

So it is with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We can go to church and hear the Gospel a thousand times and even if we know John 3:16 by heart (you DO don't you?)

[get someone to quote it--*For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*]

Hearing and knowing and understanding is not enough—even memorizing is not enough. God's gift requires that we participate—that we believe and accept and embrace the gift he has for us.

Paul also celebrates their consistency. His joy and his thankfulness comes not only from their participation in the Gospel when they first heard—but also from their continuing participation. Not only did they find eternal life in the Gospel—they also found a WAY of life, a way of being.

They were not perfect. There were certainly problems in the church at Philippi, but they were trying to grow spiritually. Instead of the old on step forward and two steps back, it seems that they were taking two steps forward and only one step back. They were trying. They were learning. They were seeking to do the will of God. They were spreading the Good News to others.

The next characteristic we are looking for in our checkup is love and that is found in verse 9: *9 This I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and all discernment;*

The Beatles song says all you need is love and I guess that is not REALLY true, but pretty close. As I understand it, true love—real love—comes from God. It is only through the love of God that we can REALLY understand what love is at all. The word “love” Paul uses here is that famous “agape” love. Love that doesn't seek its own way or own gain. Honest and true love with no strings. Agape love is true and pure and good. We can only come to understand that kind of love when we have experienced it and the only way to do that is through a relationship with God.

The church there was full of believers who had heard and who had acted—were participants in the Gospel. These were people who had experienced the love of God first-hand. Then, they had put that experience to good use.

Now here is a test—one that you DIDN'T have time to prepare for, but I bet you know the answer: Jesus said that those around us will know that we are his children based on WHAT?

That's right—not by our offerings or our attendance or our buildings or our sign or our programs—though all of those are important—but by our love for one another.

Those around us want to see our love for each other and our love for them. Do you love someone? Live the Gospel in front of them—as a church and as an individual. Tell them the Good News with all you do, as well as what you say.

Another characteristic in this checkup is real knowledge and discernment—also in verse 9 that I just read. I get the feeling that Paul is talking about SPIRITUAL understanding that comes through the scripture and through the Holy Spirit. This is understanding the will and the nature of God in a way that only comes with real depth—spiritual growth.

If we are going to grow this way, we have to use the scripture as more than proof-texts for our personal beliefs. We have to get in and dig and see what we find. Open ourselves up to the Word of God—all of it. I guarantee you that if you are honestly human some parts of scripture will appeal to you more than others. I find some parts are easier to understand than other parts. I find that some of it is just plain-old hard to swallow—but like medicine, it is important that we use it all. CHOOSE to read the scripture that confuses you or even upsets you the most. Open your mind and heart and pray—the read away. This is one way to get spiritual knowledge and spiritual discernment.

According to the order of things in this passage, when we have grown and understood and learned—we will approve of the excellent way—the most excellent things. Verse 10: *10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent; that you may be sincere and without offense to the day of Christ;*

This “approve” that Paul uses is more than just a stamp of approval. In this approval we see acceptance and action. Do you and I really approve of what is best? If so, we will DO what is best. As we find in the book of James--“*I will SHOW you my faith with my actions...*” IT is one thing to know what to do and know how to act and to know what God expects—it is another thing to put it into action.

Rutabagas are a big thing Downeast North Carolina and one year Kenny Lewis planted some. Because he was out on his fishing boat a lot, they were late, but he got them in. Well, I guess he planted rutabagas because I KNOW some plants were not. Some of the tops were crinkled and wavy and when he asked me to take a look, I pulled off a leaf and it was mustard, no doubt about it. Then we poked around some and found some of the plants were beginning to fill out and one was quite large. He pulled it out and it was round and whitish and it had purple around the top. He gave it to me and I sliced off a piece. It was really good but it was not a rutabaga. Right—it was a turnip. Looks a lot like it, but not the same. SOME of those plants may have been rutabagas but since I am not a horticulturist, the plants could only have convinced me by PROVING it. How can they prove it? By their actions. I may have faith in the seed—and the picture on the seed envelope but I will know it is true when I see and taste rutabagas.

So Paul is challenging them in verse 11: *being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

His prayer is that they will gain more love and more insight and more knowledge and that they will do what they know—producing more fruit and more evidence of their nature—their rutabagahood—their Christianity. This will glorify God and bring him praise.

Are we prepared? For relationship and for celebration of Easter right around the corner?

Today I ask each of you to look at the state of your preparation as a person and as a group—a church.

Are we participating in the Gospel? Through our relationship with God and through our consistency in living?

Do we have REAL love—for God, for fellow church members, fellow Christians, for Muslims, for Jews, for people of other faiths, for bums, for lawbreakers, for all others—those who God loves unconditionally?

Are we seeking spiritual knowledge and discernment—do we already have some maturity under our belts?

Have we put into action those things we have learned?

I know we need work. I know we haven't arrived. Paul encourages us, though, to press forward toward the prize. As we DO the Gospel in this place and when we leave.