

January 25, 2026

Paul Purdue preaching

In seminary, I took one of my required preaching classes with Dr Jerry Mercer. As Dean of the Chapel, Dr Mercer did not give you one second past 20 minutes. When you said “amen” or the clock struck zero, Dr Mercer stood up and began leading your classmates in a critique of your sermon. I said amen before the buzzer went off and my classmates and Dr Mercer’s critiques were gracious and kind. I went home on top of the world. A few days later, I went to Dr Mercer’s office for the formal assessment of my sermon. I sat down and Jerry hit play on the VCR, he said nothing, we just watched. I was proud of my sermon, but puzzled by his silence. After a few minutes, Jerry paused the video tape and asked ‘Who is that?’ I was puzzled and stunned into silence. Dr Mercer turned back to the TV and hit play. After another few minutes, he paused the tape and again asked “Who is that?” Struggling to find my voice, he pushed, “Who is that preaching?” I spoke to the floor, “That is me.” “Really” Jerry gently said, “I was not sure if it was you?... Where is that gregarious guy we see everyday in class? Where is that guy who is so full of fun and always talking about grace?” Embarrassed and a little confused, I just sat there. Jerry ejected the tape, handed it to me and said, “Paul, I do not know who you’re trying to be when you preach, maybe some important preacher from childhood or some idealized stylized preacher, but God did not call you to be someone else. God called you to be you!” That lesson was not an easy conversation, but it may have been the best thing I learned in seminary: God called me to be me, not to force me into some preordained mold.

God, who created you, did not call to be someone else. God called you to be you. God is not seeking to push us into some homogenized, anglosized, marketwise mold. God called you to be you.

Across chapter three and four, Matthew begins laying the foundation of Jesus’ ministry and our discipleship path. *As Jesus came up out of the water, Heaven was opened to him, and Jesus saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him, as a voice from heaven spoke, “This is my child whom I dearly love; I delight in him.”*

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him for forty days.

When Jesus heard that John (the Baptist) was arrested, Jesus withdrew to Galilee and settled in Capernaum and from that time on Jesus began to announce, “Change your hearts and lives! The kingdom of heaven has come near!”

- This passage about John is so informative. Jesus upon hearing that John is imprisoned and silenced by King Herod, steps into the work of proclaiming God's Kingdom on earth.

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Peter and Andrew, casting their nets into the sea. They were fishermen, a good business, with a fishermen's guild, salt curing canneries, export possibilities, excellent profits, and Roman issued tax badges for commercial fishing license and boats

Jesus said to Andrew and Peter, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed Jesus.

Jesus went from there, and seeing other brothers James and John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending nets, Jesus called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed.

Jesus then went throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."

There is something so very basic in these call stories that I think we usually overlook it. The commentaries and preachers raise many good discussions: What does it mean to fish for people? How important is the word "immediately"? What does "leaving their nets" mean for us? What are the implications of leaving family? Did these first followers hear Jesus preach before they followed or do they blindly follow? What is the nature of the kingdom of God? These are all great questions, but there is a foundational truth in this story we often miss: God calls people like us to build the kingdom of God. You are foundational to God's plans to heal your world and the world. You matter to God.

That God uses you and I is a foundational truth we find throughout the Bible. Just as God called Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Ester and Ruth, Peter and John, Mary and Martha, Phoebe and Lydia, Paul and Silas, Priscilla and Aquila, and God calls You. You and I build God's Kingdom. You build the church. You are the light of the world. You are essential, foundational to discipleship. From the beginning, Jesus calls you and I into a community of love, forgiveness, nurture and mutual growth.

You matter to God

You are essential for God's work in the world.

You are foundational

The church needs you-
 Our world needs you, you,
 Your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness
 You matter to God

Yes, sometimes God moves the mountains, divides the sea, or lifts us up to walk on water, but God usually just uses plain old us. We are foundational to God's plan to heal this world.

So just, Imagine Jesus- big golden halo- dark skin, olive eyes, curly black hair, warm welcoming smile. We have no Biblical descriptions of Jesus' looks and no mention of halos. We have lots of descriptions of Jesus' being or character. So imagine Jesus through all the titles and images: Christ: Lord, Savior, Emmanuel, God incarnate, the Word Made Flesh, son of Mary, child of God, the very image of the invisible God, the First over all creation, the One who all things were created through, Living Water, Good Shepherd, the one who existed before anything, the one who holds all things in the universe together, the head of the body- the church, the beginning of life, the end of death, the Alpha and Omega, the Crucified One, prince of peace, the Resurrection and the Life, the one in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and the one who reconciles all things on earth or in the heavens to God. (John, Colossians 1)

Imagine such a highly exalted and transcendent Jesus, what is the first thing that Jesus does? Jesus invites us to follow.

Jesus invites guys that have been up all night fishing, guys who have been cleaning fish, drying their nets in the morning sun to follow? Do you know the smell of working all night, casting wet cotton nets out into the sea and dragging them back into the boat hand over hand back? Jesus does not ask us to go get cleaned up and meet him at the Temple for prayer, Jesus comes right into the grittiness and aromas of our daily lives.

Jesus is not calling you to become somebody else. Jesus is not seeking to force you into some template or mold. God created you, created you to be you. Yes, Jesus calls us to change our hearts and minds to grow the spiritual seeds God wove into us since creation began: love, joy, peace-making, patience, kindness, grace, goodness, gentleness, justice, compassion, forgiveness and self control. But God created you to be you- there is not some christian mold God wants to press you into. You are foundational to our faith, to discipleship, to healing the world. You matter to God, to the church and the world.

From the beginning of the Bible God declares our sacred worth, Genesis one tells us

*God created humanity in God's own image,
in the divine image God created them...*
And God saw everything God had made and it was supremely good. (Genesis 1)

- Ponder that. Everything that is holy, beautiful, good, just, peace-making, patient, kind, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love: everything that is excellent, commendable, and worthy of praise: you are made of that kind of stuff.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul writes *"You are Christ's letter, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God."*

- Ponder that a minute- You are like a book of the Bible, Ester, Ruth, or Ephesians. God longs to write good news through you. Your book may at times be as wobbly as King David but God wants to use you to help heal the world. God might use you to bring freedom like Moses, build community like Lydia, dance like Miriam, comfort like Dorcas, or preach like Priscilla.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3 *Don't you know that you are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you?*

- That is radical stuff. Paul saw the beauty of the Jerusalem Temple, one of wonders of the ancient world. It was built with the very best of everything. It housed the holy of holies, the very place they believed that God resided. You house the very presence of God. You are beautiful, a temple, a place that moves us towards worship and encounter with the holy.

And friends, the world is almost always calling us to be something different than what God created us to be, the world is trying to press us into some kind of marketable mold. The market gods preach, get likes, get it together, get cleaned up, do it better, be like Taylor, Beyonce, or Brady. But, who God created to be you, is calling you to be you. Grow more into that image of God within you, grow in faith, hope and love, peace, mercy and justice, but grow.

And one more thing, God calls us to be in community, we are created for community. John Wesley taught that there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. We can't be faithful apart from being in community. The heart of Christianity is loving your neighbor as yourself, you can not do that alone. We need each other. Sometimes we need a friend to say, "Paul, I did not recognize you, God did not call you to be someone else, God called you to be you" And sometimes we need someone to call us to leave our nets and follow God's call to bring healing to the world.

Oh hear the good news, ponder it in your heart.
You matter to God.
The God who created you, calls you to be you.
You are foundational to any discipleship plan.
You are foundational to God's plans to heal the world
You are made in the image of God,
You are made supremely good.
You are a letter of Christ,
written not with ink, but by the Holy Spirit.
You are God's temple,
The Holy Spirit is dwelling within you.
You matter
You are foundation
You matter to our community
You matter to our world. Amen.