

April 12, 2026

Paul Purdue preaching

The Apostle Paul was in a pickle of his own making. Leading a sort of capital campaign to support the church in Jerusalem, Paul had bragged to the Macedonians Church about the generosity of the Corinthians Church and Paul was worried that the wealthier Corinthians might not come through. One might question Paul's methods, playing one church against the other and crowing about someone's generosity before they share their commitment card, but Paul owns up to this mistake or miscalculation writing: *"I'm sending some leaders ahead so that our bragging about you won't be empty words and we do not all end up being embarrassed!"* Well, maybe Paul's admission is still a bit questionable?

For years, such passages caused me hermeneutical headaches, perhaps because I read them thinking God directly dictated the words onto the page, moving Paul's pen, with no human thinking, experience, or influence involved. But what if God inspired Paul in the same way God Spirit speaks through prophets, preachers, poets and prayers today. (Romans 8) What if God was working inside an imperfect Apostle? What if Paul wrote to church leaders who knew him well, and who loved him for being the messy incarnation he was: imperfections, misunderstanding, mistakes and all? Literalism struggles with a passage like *"I wish you would put up with me in a little foolishness. Yes, do put up with me!"* There is hope, freedom and joy, in realizing God speaks through people like us, who might be prone to bragging and even foolishness. (2 Cor 11)

I wonder, if Paul upon rereading what he just wrote in permanent marker thought "that needs some work" and lacking a delete key added: *"The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not regretfully or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."*

The prosperity gospel has done so much harm to the church and to our nation. So many popular preachers have described giving as a Holy Hedge Fund, where God more than matches our contribution. It is little wonder that many sincere Christians mistake free-market capitalism for the Good News of Jesus Christ. Despite Jesus teaching *"you can not serve God and wealth... for where your treasurers are your heart will follow"* (Matthew 6)

Paul tells us God will provide “*an abundance*”, but the abundance is not a sack of cash or a blessed portfolio. No God changes the equation, the calculus of our lives. The abundance comes as our Creator transforms us creating a cheerful heart, a grateful mindset, and a generous spirit. The abundance arrives with a deep love for neighbor, often born by actively giving instead of waiting to feel love for others. The payoff for generosity is a deeper Christ-likeness: gratitude, generosity, grace, compassion, unity, equity, and empathic action. The harvest is righteousness, doing the right things: loving your neighbor as yourself, providing shelter, bringing about justice, defending the powerless, sharing your possessions with those in need. (Luke 6, Matthew 25)

Paul closed the chapter saying “*Thanks be to God for God’s indescribable gift!*” Gratitude and generosity are a little indescribable. Faith, Hope, Love, Forgiveness, Release, and Grace resist spreadsheet calculations. God calls us away from health and wealth into a different set of values, desires, goals, practices, motives and rewards.

Gratitude and generosity are deeply rewarding but deeply counter-cultural values.

Let’s consider a few definitions:

Consider the adjective GRATEFUL

1. appreciative of benefits received : feeling or showing thanks

I love that Webster puts some economic jargon in the definition: “thankful for the benefits we have received.” Gratitude is an awareness of the benefits all around us.

How about “GENEROSITY”

1. liberal in giving: openhanded
2. marked by abundance or ample proportions

Now Consider CONSUME the root of consumerism

*Consume (transitive verb)*

1. to do away with completely : destroy
2. to spend wastefully: squander to use up

Yikes! Jesus warned us about the consumer culture 2000 years ago “*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” (Matthew 6)

There are other spiritual words that call us away from the marketplace. Forgiveness means the erasure of debts. Grace means the extension of benefits free from our

earning them. God is calling us to see the markets through a different lens... If anything is excellent, worthy of praise, good, think about these things, dwell in these things.

From inside a Roman prison the Apostle Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi *"I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and plenty. I have learned the secret of having plenty and of being in need: I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.* (Philippians 4) How is it that Paul and Silas once sang while inside a jail? (Acts 16) They are wearing chains, and experiencing injustice. Consumerism teaches that they have less than nothing- they are destroyed. Gratitude changes everything. As they whispered, did they notice the acoustics were lovely or did they simply know singing together is beautiful anywhere? Is not a cardinal's song the same in an abandoned parking lot as high on Mount Leconte? Is a wedding vow made more sacred by what couple is wearing or by a lavish venue? Is a friend's embrace more comforting if they drove over in a luxury automobile or if they took the bus? Is laughter more real in Disneyland? Is child's play happier with a coach, practices, uniforms, rules, and referees or just playing around? Gratitude awakens us not to the next new thing, but to what we already have, not to what we are driving or wearing, but to our sacred worth.

Gratitude liberates us, getting us off the treadmill of consumption that forever judges us and repeats the lie: "You don't quite have enough... You are not enough?" Gratitude teaches us to dwell in our sacred worth and that of other people. Gratitude centers us in Loving God, Knowing God's love and loving others. Gratitude is noticing our blessing and being present in the moment.

Today is Gratitude Sunday, we invite you to reflect on God's impact on your life through Belmont? How has your life been changed for the better through Belmont? Notice it.

I have spent time this week intentionally noticing how God has impacted me through Belmont. In a campaign meeting on Wednesday, former pastor, Rev. John Collett gave thanks for Belmont's Ethos of openness to what God is doing in our midst: our willingness to risk loving people. This openness creates a safe place for us, our neighbors and our pastors.

On Easter Sunday, two of our high schoolers, Olliver and Dayton were serving as acolytes. We were all in the vestibule waiting to process when one of them asked if I was nervous about preaching. I confessed I felt a little nervous not because of the size of the crowd, but because Easter brings a different crowd, with some folks we will not see again for awhile, and you want to get it right. As we moved to our places, Dayton reassured me, **"You got this Pastor Paul- because God is at work in you"**. Perhaps,

up in heaven, John Wesley heard this and high fived the Apostle Paul? We are raising young people in a beautiful life-giving theology. I am grateful that God is working in Dayton, in Oliver, in Belmont and in all of us. Nashville will always need a safe place like this. Amen