

Ephesians 2:1-10- "But God..."

Some years ago when I was taking courses in life coaching (which is a method of asking powerful questions and deeply listening to help people in their stuck places in life get unstuck), I had an important takeaway. Some of you, who are quicker/wiser than I am, probably already know this. Did you know that anytime you say or read the word "but," it negates what has previously been said or written. "But" cancels out whatever precedes it. For example, if you want to impress a friend, I'd suggest not saying the following. "You did great, but I'd suggest studying a little harder next time." OR "I love you, but I really don't like your cooking." "But" is generally accepted as a signal that the really important part of the sentence is coming up. Have you ever listened to someone and waited for the "but" in their story because that's where the truth really is?! I sometimes anticipate it and ask, "What's the but?" Instinctively, we recognize that what follows "but" is what is really thought, felt or intended. In order to keep you out of hot water, the advice is- when needed- to substitute "but" with "and." For example, "I love your mom and she is really bossy." Sometimes though "but" is used on purpose and can bring good news. That's the case in today's scripture but before we read God's word for us this day, let us pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, vv. 1-10. **READ.**

Here Paul is writing to note the work of God's power among those who believe. These particular ten verses are often referred to as the summary of Christian teaching. In the first three verses, Paul basically states the human condition. He begins with where they were- you were dead...that is what we were...dried up, exhausted, afraid, hopeless, lifeless, thinking we were in control (and this is what

we sometimes still are but it's not who God created us to be). The Ephesians are reminded in this letter of their past life, when they were dead through trespasses and sins (not just the Gentiles but everyone, even the Jews). No pointing fingers here. Sin does not discriminate based on religion, race, gender, etc.. They are reminded of the times when they gave into sin and did things their own way. Times when they were tempted by "the ruler of the power of the air" - the devil, who is still at work in the course of this world. The times they/we gave into the passions of our flesh. The times when they/we were referred to as children of wrath. Death through trespasses is where some of us still linger and maybe live in our thoughts and actions (or inactions).

I'm a recovering workaholic. I used to think it was my job to save the world. It was exhausting not to mention misguided and arrogant. I was burned out and spiritually dying. I placed my trust in my ability to get things done. I was young and driven and wanted to succeed. I sometimes worked over 80 hours a week. I also thought that if I didn't do it, it wasn't going to get done. If I didn't show up when I was sick, worship wouldn't happen. I was single with no other responsibilities and that was one of my excuses to work a lot and over time, I began to realize that I wanted and needed to remove the "S" from my chest. Not an "S" for Superwoman, which was often a joke among friends, but an "S" for Savior. It's hard to pinpoint the exact moment I realized with all humility that it's God through Jesus Christ who does the saving, not me. Not anyone else. And I still struggle sometimes remembering this. Like I said earlier, I'm a slow learner. Death through sin shows up individually and corporately. All we have to do is read the paper or look online to see a world that seems to be filled with death.

Sometimes the very way we interact with one another fosters death not growth and life. Following the course of this world, we're a part of a society that has become resigned...resigned to places and the power of death through trespasses and sins in our own lives...we develop apathy which assumes God's power isn't so great as to work through us to overcome it.

Look at the verbs in this passage. They're past tense. Were dead. Once lived. Were children of wrath. This is their/this is our former reality and conduct because and here comes the BUT. The But is the turning point...the pivot- the shift- the conjunction that negates or cancels what was previously written...said...lived. This moment of BUT is significant. God intervenes, transforms and forgives us. "**BUT God**, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:4-5). **But...God**- these are two of the greatest words in the Bible, especially when you realize God didn't have to do anything. These two simple yet profound words in and of themselves contain, in a sense, the whole of the Gospel. They tell us what God has done and how God has intervened in what would otherwise be a hopeless situation. Even when we were dead through our trespasses...even when we gave into the desires of the flesh...even when we've lived with the illusion of control and our own ability to save ourselves...God made us alive together with Christ. Even when we were dead through our sins...God loved and loves us out of great love. **But God** has destined us not for wrath, but for salvation through Jesus Christ. This text is proof of God's amazing love and grace "which has totally changed both our reality and our conduct forever" (Working Preacher podcast,

Skinner, March 5th 2018). If an “and” were here it wouldn’t be the same. The **but God** changes our story forever! All that we have in Christ is by grace. By grace we have been saved and raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places. The scripture doesn’t say out of pity or out of frustration or out of sadness God made us alive together with Christ. No! It’s says out of the great love with which he loved us...

Out of this great love, God made us alive. And...it’s not just that God made us alive. It’s that God made us alive- not alone- not isolated- but together with Christ. Particularly in our culture, we are surrounded by the myth that you create your own path **but God** says you’re made alive only through God’s power- you are saved only by God’s grace. Jesus was dead, dead, dead on the cross **but God** raised him from the dead. We’re not only made alive but raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places. The resurrected Christ rules over all powers and dominions. God wants generation after generation after generation to experience “the immeasurable riches of God’s grace in kindness towards us...in Jesus Christ” (Eph. 2:7). This just isn’t about the future though. It’s applicable now. Salvation is from God, and it is a gift- just as grace and faith are gifts. Again the Ephesians and we, too, are reminded...”for by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God- not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). We neither make nor save ourselves. There’s nothing about which to brag on ourselves. **But God...** God does the making and the saving and to be clear, we aren’t given an extra star in our heavenly crown for the good we do either. You don’t have to try to earn God’s love or acceptance. God already loves us. We can’t buy God’s mercy. It is

a gift given to the undeserving. A gift we can choose to receive. “This divine conversion had nothing to do with how loveable we were. It had everything to do with how incredibly loving God is” (Working Preacher, Richard Carlson, March 22, 2009). God’s grace is greater than you can ever imagine. And our response?! To walk in- to live into grace with faith and to be who God created us to be.

These words of Scripture tell us that we’re created in Christ Jesus for good works. Now this message throws some Christians off. “It has been so strongly emphasized among some of us that salvation is by grace alone that we are often suspicious of good works” (Gurthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 332). “Good works are not what we do to win salvation; they are what we do to demonstrate and enjoy it” (*The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible*, p. 2121). Yet that doesn’t mean we quit being obedient. God’s grace isn’t an excuse to sin but rather a reason to love and serve. There is no such thing as Christian faith without Christian action. “We cannot know Christ as Savior for us without acknowledging him also as Lord over us. To have faith in him means inevitably also to follow and serve him” (Guthrie, p. 333). Each of us is particularly equipped by the Holy Spirit with various gifts to serve others and by grace through faith we trust that *God works in, despite and through us*. We don’t have to have it all together to serve. It is only possible to do good works because of the gift of salvation. Rather than selling out to worldly values, we are to aspire to God’s values. The Ephesians and we, too, are invited to partner in God’s redeeming work in the world. Doing good works doesn’t mean that we won’t stand in darkness or won’t be approached or tempted by evil. No. Doing good works means that we keep trusting Christ and living in him, in spite

of...in the face of evil. Living into God's way of life means that we allow God to turn us away from death to life.

We were...**But God**...we are. In his book *Life Together*, German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writes, *It is the grace of the gospel, which is so hard for the pious to understand, that confronts us with the truth and says: You are a sinner, a great, desperate sinner; now come, as the sinner that you are, to God who loves you. He wants you as you are; He does not want anything from you, a sacrifice, a work. He wants you alone...God has come to you to save the sinner. Be glad! The message is liberation through truth. You can hide nothing from God. The mask you wear before others will do you no good before Him. God wants to see you as you are, God wants to be gracious to you.*

With God, the Creator, through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit "love and mercy are stronger than fear and control because in the kingdom of God..that's how things work" (Nadia Bolz Weber, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2015/03/a-sermon-on-addiction-and-the-problem-with-our-me-based-solutions/>). Because **But God!**
Amen.