

Did you know that anytime you say or read the word “but,” it negates what has previously been said or written? Yes. “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?” for what follows “but” is what is really thought, felt or intended. In order to keep you out of hot water might I suggest substituting “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. READ.**

After a week like this, I don’t know about y’all, but I’m reminded how much we all need saving from ourselves. In a world torn apart by violence, theological and political differences, poverty, war, hate (all isms), hunger, you name it, a rereading of Ephesians is urgently needed. Here Paul is writing about the importance of Jesus’s followers to remain in God’s mission and to refuse to allow differences to obstruct them from participating in the vision of God’s work in the world. These ten verses force us to face the power that draws us into the heart of God’s love, and consequently into reconciliation with others. Paul first states the human condition- starting with where they were- dead...that is what we

were...dried up, exhausted, afraid, hopeless, lifeless, thinking we were in control. The Ephesians are reminded 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 today. The times they gave into the passions of our flesh and 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). Death through sin shows up individually and corporately. The violent events and words exchanged on all sides are not what we are purposed for by God.

These words come this week from a colleague following the news of Charlie Kirk’s assassination and yet another school shooting in CO, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner, whose imagination has been shaped more by force than by the cross. The lament that haunts me is that these shootings aren’t aberrations. They’re the logical fruit of a nation addicted to violence as its first language. This isn't the failure of two lone gunmen, but the indictment of an entire culture that finds it easier to imagine an armed savior than a crucified one” (Derek Penwell, UCC Clergy on FB). All I keep thinking this week is, “We were made for more.” I don’t mean more as in burning ourselves out or denying or burying our feelings in work. I mean God purposed us to walk in Christ’s ways- to live by the power and grace of God. We were all created on purpose, for a purpose- and our gifts come alive in

community as we walk in God's goodness by grace. Notice the verbs in this passage. They're past tense. Were dead. Once lived. Were children of wrath. This is their former reality and conduct because **But God**. The **But God** 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**- 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. If an "and" were here it wouldn't be the same. **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 says out of the great love with which he loved us.

God's grace is greater than you can ever imagine. And our response?! Last week in John's Gospel, our response to Jesus being the Vine is to abide, this week our response is to walk in-to live into God's grace with faith and to be who God purposed us to be. Did you notice that the word "walk" is used twice in this passage as bookends- in v. 1 and v. 10? "This verb, 'walk,' in Greek, used metaphorically, pertains to the orientation of one's life. Many people today "walk" in the stream of popular Americana, of *People* magazine, of social media and smart phones, of sports culture, of a political

party and ideology, and of a general cultural mentality that shamelessly promotes the elevation of the self or an ideology above all else” (Kyle Fever, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Paul reminds his audience that we were once walking according to “the ways of the world.” But God through Christ made us alive, created us new. This is God’s gift of grace. To be clear, salvation is by grace, not works. “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). We aren’t given an extra star in our heavenly crown for the good work we do. No. We 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. Yet, also to be clear, God’s grace isn’t an excuse to sin or to quit being obedient. Rather, God’s grace is a reason to love and serve- to walk in Christ’s good works. 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/abiding in him, in spite of...in the face of evil. Jesus Christ is the primary actor here, and he does what he also commands us to do. Our living out the greatest commandments are thus communion with Christ, an active participation in Christ’s life and work. Our faith, itself a gift of the Spirit, drives us to understand every moment, situation, and relationship in relation to God, no matter how good or bad they are. So how are we today going to get to a place where we truly believe we’re

worthy enough to receive God's grace? And then what does it look like to walk in Christ's good works today?

I think it looks like "learning to tell the truth without contempt, making violence less available and peace more practical, and practicing enemy-love in public. We live with the audacity to dream of a different world where we actually believe the Prince of Peace meant what he said when he told us to love even our enemies" (Penwell). "A few verses further in Ephesians, Paul stresses the importance of reconciliation with God and with each other. This new house under the Lordship of Jesus has no place for divided humanity. The 'other' is no longer the 'other' but a sibling. We are saved so that the good works that reconcile and are evidence of reconciliation would be our way of life. It's not for us; it's for the reconciliation of the world (2 Cor. 5:18-20)" (Fever). This past Thursday was also the 24<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 9/11. "Looking back, the world of the early 21st century seems so different- and yet the same. We're still rocked by violence, by the power of words. We still encounter hatred that knocks us off our feet and pulls our eyes away from God's active reconciliation in the world (Rose Schrott Taylor, *The Presbyterian Outlook*). All the more reason we are reminded to walk, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in Christ's good works. Remembering that we don't manufacture love or justice, we join where Christ is already loving and reconciling. "Jesus consistently took the side of those whom power treated as disposable: the impoverished, the imprisoned, the sick, the stranger. That's not partisanship. It's simply walking in Jesus' example. Jesus called out predatory religion, disrupted economies of exploitation, named

rulers' threats without flinching, and still refused the sword. Loving our enemies never meant moral equivalence. It means refusing to mirror their violence while committing to stand between them and the people they crush. The thing is, we love enemies and bind wounds and pursue justice not because it works, but because that's who we are. We do it because it's the right thing to do. We walk in the good works of Christ, who refuses vengeance, protects the vulnerable, tells the truth, and resists turning any neighbor into fuel for someone's machine. We don't sprinkle holy water on violence. Absolutely not! We condone it. Those of us who follow Jesus are called to tell the truth about what happened without slander, without collective blame, and without conspiracy theater. We grieve like people committed to healing, not like people shopping for a pretext. Scripture's alternative to revenge isn't acting like we don't see it. Instead, it's a fierce determination to pursue good—even for those who hate us. We all know what the machine wants. It wants us divided, angry enough to mistake catharsis for courage. But we belong to a different economy, one where the last, the least, and the lost aren't a means to *\*anybody's\** end... and neither are our political opponents. That's not capitulation. That's faithfulness” (Penwell).

Paul calls us all to find our place in God's mission. We were...**But God...**we are. We're transformed by God into new life like butterflies from caterpillars. The calloused hands that have held on to our hearts are pulled apart, and we see that our calling isn't to work harder at being good. Our calling is to walk more deeply in the goodness of God through Jesus. Yet in

the midst of our sinfulness, we seem to be reversing this message of unity because our walls of hostility are erected around issues I mentioned earlier. **But God** through Christ calls us to build bridges, not walls. I want to echo Pastor and GA Senator, Raphael Warnock's words on the floor of the Senate this week. "May we resist the seductive sirens of those who are trying to convince us that we're at war with one another. At the end of the day, "We, the people," is all we've got. Choose what the Apostle Paul called "the more excellent way." The way of love- love come alive in a complicated story of a diverse people who refused to give up on one another. It takes strength to love. Courage, patience and persistence to love. God, grant us strength and courage, patience and persistence for the facing of this hour and for the living of these days." This is what we're purposed by God to do. Our lives are Jesus' sermons so let's live so God can use us in God's mission. Let's walk together- dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus- joining Christ at work in building bridges for a safe and accepting future for everyone-and let's do it in honor of all the victims of violence, known and unknown, those who make the headlines and those who don't. Walk and then Fly, butterflies, fly in the goodness of God! Amen.