

Within

1 Peter 3:4-5



Move Your 'But'

We all want to live a powerful Christian witness, but how? How do we get our lives to speak His glory in a way that the world will hear? It begins with one small, but very important, thing:

We've got to move our 'but.'

Today's Christianity starts with the self. Any time we are introduced the Word of God, we are told that the best way to see it is through the lens of our selves - our lives, our experiences, our truths. This has resulted in a Christianity that almost always says, "I..., but God..." I am a sinner, but God will forgive me. I am broken, but God makes me whole. I lie, but God is truth. I struggle, but God is victory. You name it, God is the response. We don't even try to live holy lives. We don't have to. God spends His entire existence cleaning up the messes that we've made.

Where is there any space at all for glory?

There's not. And we've convinced ourselves that this is exactly how it's supposed to be. We are "supposed" to be sinners, liars, hypocrites, strugglers, etc. That's our role. We tell ourselves it's beautiful because when we are these things, God gets to be who He really is. (Paul talks about this in Romans 6, so at least we're not alone.)

But then we're shocked when others look at our lives and see sinners, liars, hypocrites, and strugglers. I mean, gosh, didn't they read our bumper stickers? Don't they know we're trying to make a statement about God's glory here?

Esther's story could not be more different from ours in this regard. Esther's story starts with God; she (and Mordecai, depending on what section of the story you're reading) are the but.

Esther starts with the idea that God is good, and she works out from there. She starts with the idea that God provides for widows and orphans, BUT SHE has to accept her kinsman-redeemer. She does; the Scriptures tell us that Esther always did everything Mordecai told her to do.

Esther starts with the idea that God protects His people, BUT SHE knows that this requires her to speak. She's been put in this position for just such a time as this, and God requires her here to use her voice. She does; she petitions the king on behalf of her people.

Mordecai starts with the idea that God is a jealous God, BUT HE must serve God exclusively. He does; he refuses to bow down to other gods.

At every turn Esther's story starts with God and asks what that requires of her.

But our stories start with us and ask what that requires of God; it's a cheap Christian cover. And it's why our witness doesn't work. This world doesn't see God's glory in that; all they see are sinners and hypocrites.

If we want our witness to be powerful, we have to go back to the Esther method. We've got to start with God and ask what that requires of us. We've got to move our 'but's.

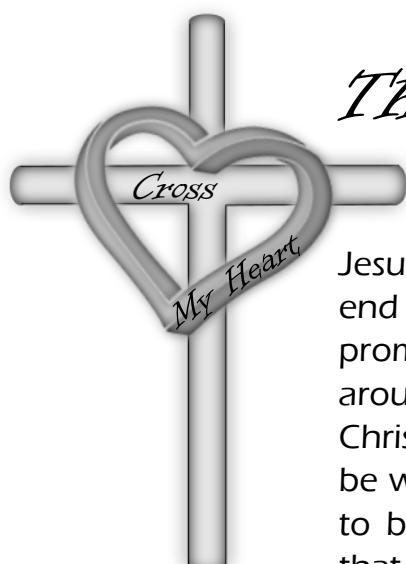
Thanksgiving is behind us and most of us now have our eyes on Christmas. One of the many reasons we enjoy the holidays is because we look forward to spending time with family. We only see some family members during this special time of year. Have you ever walked away from a family gathering feeling let down, as if being with your family wasn't the blessing you were expecting it to be? Did you feel something was missing? People will let us down, they'll disappoint us, even family. There is One who can fill the void our family leaves. God is waiting patiently to step in and fill our emptiness.

I recently read an article written by Max Lucado about how this works. Some of his words stopped me in my tracks. He said in order to fill the emptiness, we need to EMOTIONALLY accept God as our Father. I know with "head" knowledge that God is my Father, and I feel in my "heart" that God is my Father, but emotionally? Is God my Father emotionally? I will admit, the tears rolled down my cheeks as I contemplated and prayed over this question. Some of us had fathers who violated our trust and innocence. Have I accepted god emotionally as my Father? Am I even capable?

To accept God as our Lord is to recognize Him as sovereign. To accept God as our Savior means we have accepted His gift of salvation. To accept God as our Father is a different matter entirely. Ideally our Fathers protect us and provide for us. Have you turned that role over to God? Completely? Emotionally?

When we can do that, what a wonderful feeling it will be to crawl up on His lap and let Him hold us in His arms, eternally.

Marilyn



The Promises of God

Matthew 28:20

Jesus said, "I will be with you always, until the very end of the age." And this sounds like an incredible promise, but it is a little hard to wrap our minds around. Thankfully, we have the miracle of Christmas to help us. For the God who professes to be with us always is the very same God who came to be with us at all. None of the other gods did that. Not one. So we can look at a little baby in a manger and say, yes. Yes, He will be with us always, for He is with us now. Behold!

DINNER

OUT

No Dinner Out
in December.

Join us in January!
(Check newsletter
for details.)

God,
We are blown away
by Your most
wonderful miracle
of all - that You
became a God who
came down to us,
who loved us so
much that You
decided to dwell
among us. We are
in awe of Your
Amazing Grace that
chose to dirty His
feet with the dust
of our fallen world,
that we might one
day rise with Him
to be with You. It's
inconceivable,
Lord, and yet, it's
real. We know that
it is. And so our
hearts cry out with
Mary's in
anticipation - my
soul magnifies the
Lord; my spirit
rejoices in God, my
Savior. My Jesus.
Amen.



Growing Faith

All this year, we've been looking at what it takes to grow faith, straight from the Bible itself. As the year winds down, I thought now would be a good time to put it all together and reflect on the big picture of faith as it grows in our lives.

Faith begins to grow when we take the seed of it, which is inside every one of us, and plant it somewhere. This means that we have to die to much if we want to live to more, and 1 Corinthians 15:36-38 affirms this truth.

Where we plant our seed matters, and Paul tells us that love is the best ground for planting faith (Ephesians 3:16-17). Planted in love - both loving and being loved - our faith begins to put down roots of hope, forming for us a solid foundation (Colossians 1:23).

From this foundation, we reach upward toward the Son, which gives us our confidence (1 Timothy 1) and our nourishment (John 1:4, 9). Then hope sprouts forth from our roots and forms the stem by which we flourish and bear fruit (Colossians 1:4b-6b).

We turn now from Paul to Jesus and reflect on the parable of the soil, which reminds us that not every seed grows in just the same way or produces just as much (Luke 8:4-15). We have to be mindful about the kind of soil that we're providing, the kind of loving and being loved that we're planting our faith in, knowing, too, that none of us is good soil all of the time.

And none of us needs a great big seed of faith to plant, either. Jesus tells a story in which He reminds His disciples that all you need is faith the size of a mustard seed, and it can grow to be a towering shelter from the elements. Just the tiniest little bit is enough.

Finally, we were reminded that all flowers and fruit come in seasons, os if we're not seeing what we want, sometimes we just have to wait a little longer. It may not be our season yet.

But be assured, it will be. We are growing faith, and the harvest is near.

Gingerbread Gooey Butter Cookies

2 1/4 c + 1 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
2 tsp. baking powder
1/4 tsp. baking soda
2 1/2 tsp. ground ginger
2 tsp. ground cinnamon
1/2 tsp. ground allspice
1/2 tsp. nutmeg
1/4 tsp. ground cloves
8 oz. cream cheese, softened
1 c sugar
1/2 c brown sugar
1 Tbsp. molasses
1 tsp. pure vanilla extract
1/4 tsp. almond extract
1/2 tsp. salt
1 large egg + 1 large egg yolk
1 1/2 to 2 c confectioners' sugar, sifted, for rolling cookies

In medium bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder, baking soda, and spices until well blended. Set aside.

Using electric mixer, cream together cream cheese and butter until well blended, creamy and smooth. Beat in sugars, molasses, extracts, and salt; mix until well combined and light and fluffy. Add egg and egg yolk and beat in well until creamy and light, about 1-2 minutes on medium speed.

On low speed, gradually add flour mixture and mix until just fully incorporated. Dough will be very sticky. Cover and refrigerate for several hours or overnight.

Arrange oven rack in lower third of oven and preheat to 325. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper; set aside.

Place confectioners' sugar in small bowl; set aside.

Roll into generous 1-inch balls. Then roll in confectioners' sugar to lightly coat. Place dough balls on prepared baking sheets at least 2" apart. Then, roll each ball in confectioners' sugar once again.

Bake until cookies have spread into round cookie shapes and are puffed and crackly, about 14-14 1/2 minutes. Do not overbake. The cookies will still be soft in the centers. If they start to brown around the edges, they have baked too long.

Allow cookies to cool on baking sheet for at least 10 minutes. Transfer to wire rack to cool completely.

If desired, chill the cookies in the refrigerator in an airtight container. Before serving, dust cookies lightly with additional confectioners' sugar. Serve cookies chilled or at room temperature.

Bible Word Search

Psalm 89:5-15

O Lord, the heavens praise your miracles and your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones. Who in the skies can compare with the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord? God is terrifying in the council of the holy ones. He is greater and more awe-inspiring than those who surround him. O Lord God of Armies, who is like you? Mighty Lord, even your faithfulness surrounds you. You rule the raging sea. When its waves rise, you quiet them. ...The heavens are yours. The earth is also yours. You made the world and everything in it. You created north and south. Mount Tabor and Mount Hermon sing your name joyfully. Your arm is mighty. Your hand is strong. Your right hand is lifted high. Righteousness and justice are the foundations of your throne. Mercy and truth stand in front of you. Blessed are the people who know how to praise you.

H W I H R E Q D V M O J D B M B U Q Y M J I Y C V
S N O I T A D N U O F H Q M V J X H R G C A T Z L
K F Z Q M Y O Q I C W P X H F J J V E Y P H C K
Q F A I T H F U L N E S S K U L N V U A D A G L D
R E D D V K U R Z V S G R Q X F P A M M V O I C F
V O M A A P J P F E Q N K F H F H S G U M E M K H
L R J V Y W Y N E G E I K Z W C F S D E Y X N V B
A L Y W O A K S O N I G G A G A Y E V H K O H S I
R F K K U W D Z J P O A P N E V A M C G L S P R C
M A R G R E A X L W Y R O S J T D B E O O E R I J
I V O B S I Q Q C U L C H J D O M L Z D R M P S Z
E B V S A N W O C W E R R T Z U J Y S O D O I G F
S D E E C S M M Z S E H Q E O E V N M X E Q U S L
A L E C D P I K N C U V C L M P A O B T P W G A W
B D R T A I C O Q W T U Q P H A L M L L U Q M G C
T J L R F R U J H O X T L O M E D R O R Q R T K A
M G E G N I H T Y R E V E E B A F E V N N C X E Q
B H M U R N L T V H E X S P X F A H I N G U Y Z I
G D O M C G O G M Y L L U F Y O J Z D X N Q X O D
B V N P G T N C I V R N G V T T W I N R T W J H E
H F P U R Y H C R J N I F N M L A S P E S I A R P
K D E U O M L Y A C F H X B I W J Z H Y C Z G J A
L J T W D R Q V C B E T A B S Y P F Q A U K M Y D
E H Q Z M C R Z L R R A Y K G R F I R S M E Y X N
X T L X C W V U E T Z B R T J R L I P C G S C I A
B N F F W A V E S T R O N G X K E P R P E I D M H
P M Z T E S Y X R G H R V R X V N A D R B N R Y T
W H M C R X A L H C N R E W M J M P T H E G I I R
V D V V U S O T O A M I I Y R E U C R E A T E D A
D X P M L H U U G D S N E I Q K Z S B X R Q Q X E
T C Q C Y O N O K H H H B B O E G B T V H H A E G
D U I U S C O T E N J T T Q W I G Z P I R Y H Q U
C R N P I J D P Y L O H R Y F Z J X L W C F L X F
N Y X L X E D L R O W M S O H G O W Q L K E Q Y A
I V Q C S R T Y P K G W O O N P Q J Q B Z C E R I

In God's Own Word



So many times, in our contemporary society, we hear it said that there are many roads that lead to God. Or someone might say that there is more than one way to God. Many people that we meet, as we live out our lives today, do not search out the truth of God's Word. They only repeat what other people say without making an effort to make sure it is true.

In the book of Isaiah, God speaks to the people regarding His deity. He says in Isaiah 45:5-6, "I am the Lord, and there is no other, apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other."

He makes it very plain that He is God and there is no other. He goes ahead to explain that He created everything. Not only is He the one and only living God, He created man and the universe in which He placed him. He can foretell what is going to happen in the future and it all comes to pass as He predicted.

Not only is He the Creator of the universe, He also has the power to save everyone who obeys Him and the power to punish those who do not obey. In Isaiah 45:22-25, the Lord says, "Turn to me and be saved, all your ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked. Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, 'In the Lord alone are righteousness and strength. All who have raged against Him will come to Him and be put to shame, but in the Lord all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult.'" So God alone has the power to save and the power to condemn.

So what about the claim that there are many ways and many roads to get to Him? Jesus speaks to this in John 14:6. He says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This declaration by Jesus makes it very plain that there are not numerous roads to God. There is not more than one way to get to God. There is one way...that is through Jesus.

So what should our attitude be toward all of this? Philippians 2:5-11 repeats what we read in Isaiah 45. It says, "Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus: who, being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

After reading God's Word, we are led to understand that there is only one God and only one way to get to that God. The one and only way is through Jesus Christ; that's according to His own words. So when we hear people say there are many ways, we have a reply for them. They may not believe it, but it is ours to defend God's Word and tell them the truth about the one and only way to God. Through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Hymn and Her Reflections on Worship

We don't understand God's will. We can't fathom the Big Picture. But as believers, we know there is a Big Picture, and we know God is the illustrator.

God makes no mistakes. He is our creator, He is our promise, He is our salvation. He is working on His masterpiece, you and I are a brush stroke in His magnificent grace.

He will deliver us just as promised. This song captures the very essence of obedience to His Word. His creation, His works of art, exist out of His love. His love is enough to create silent rocks, roaring oceans, submissive winds. The very vapor of His breath created planets, and the difference between night and day. We cannot imagine, we cannot come close to recognizing the magnitude of our God.

We could thank Him 100 billion times, it wouldn't be enough. We could pray 100 billion times, still not close enough to express that love He has painted us with. We know we aren't enough. That is why we have Jesus Christ as our savior, to intercede for us.

He tells us we are formed in His image. Can you believe that?! His heart is in us; His breath is in us; His spirit is in us. We ask, how can we ever express our thanks to God... The answer is this...

Love as He loves, breathe as He breathes, use your talents for His glory. Invest the Word into your heart, share God's grace, your gift, with others. Magnify His name among your circles. You may be the only example of God's love someone in that circle ever experiences. He gave His life for us.

Let's give our lives for Him.

"If the stars were made to worship, so will I
If the mountains bow in reverence, so will I
If the oceans roar Your greatness, so will I
For if everything exists to lift You high, so will I.

If the wind goes where You send it, so will I
If the rocks cry out in silence, so will I
If the sum of all our praises still falls shy
Then we'll sing again a hundred billion times."

("So Will I (100 billion X)" by Hillsong)