

## “But God”

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

We are almost a full month into this New Year, and I have to ask, “How are you doing with your New Year’s resolutions?” Only about half of Americans make a New Year’s resolutions. And of those who do, about half of you have quit by now at the end of one month. And we have reasons – all kinds of reasons why we don’t, or believe we can’t, accomplish what we set out to do. The culprit why I don’t become the person I want to become boils down to a two-word phrase, “But I...”

I know I promised to work out and get in shape, **but I** feel kind of tired right now. I know it would be great to get into a Bible study group, **but I** don’t want to give up that time. I would love to live relaxed and confident, **but I** worry. I would love to have my finances in order and to be generous, **but I** spend too much. I know I should eat kale and quinoa and tofu, **but I** love butter and sugar and bacon.

“But I...” is a belief that keeps me from succeeding at doing what really matters, and it stops me from even trying.

That little phrase, “But I...” actually occurs in the Bible a whole bunch of times as the reason or excuse people give for not doing what God calls them to do. God says, “Moses, I want you to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go.” Moses says, “**But I** am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” God goes to Gideon and says, “I want you to deliver my people from the Midianites,” and Gideon says, “**But I** am the least in my family.” God goes to Jeremiah and says, “I want you to prophesy and to speak my word to my people,” and Jeremiah says, “**But I** am only a child and too young.”

God calls Esther, go to the king and save Israel from being murdered. She said, “**But I** have not been called by the king for 30 days and I can’t just waltz in there to see him without being invited.”

God promised Abraham that he would become the father of a great nation.” Abraham answered back, “**But I** am too old.”

Jesus asked Peter “Cast your nets on the other side of the boat and I'll do a miraculous thing for you.” Peter says, “**But I** tried all night and caught no fish.”

Over and over we see these words, “**But I.**” “But I can't, or I won't...”

What's interesting is that God pretty much never actually disagrees with any of those objections. He doesn't say, “Moses, I beg to differ with you. I think you are actually a very good speaker.” God didn't say to Abraham “you may be almost 100, but compared to Me, you're not old at all.” He never disputes their claims of inadequacy because we really are by ourselves not able to handle on our own what God calls us to.

Us people, however, are the opposite of God on this. Someone says, “Oh, I can't do this. I'm not good at that. I'm too old, or too young, or whatever.” And we dispute their claim of inadequacy. We say, “You can do this. You're amazing!” We live in a time where everybody is great at everything, and so we ignore the fact that without God, we really can't.

Frequently people ask me, “Pastor, do you play golf?” No, I don't. I do not play golf.” I entered a golf tournament once. It was at the first church I served. The people were so kind to me. One guy who was a real good golfer, had his personal golf cart and I got to ride with him in style. It was a beautiful summer day on the course with good conversation. I even won a trophy that day – for the most strokes. I got – by far – the worst score ever. Golfing is not my thing. It's not in my skill set. Sign me up for a PGA tour, and encourage me all you want with praise – “You can do this! You're amazing!” But I ... stink at golf.

The people in the young little church in Corinth had plenty of “But I” kinds of reasons. They could put up roadblocks of their own weaknesses to keep them from following God. Paul's letter to them is being read out loud for them all and this is Paul's description of them at the beginning of this letter. ***“Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human***

***standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth."***

That was an odd way to address a crowd back in that day.

Paul doesn't start out by saying, "Hey, Corinth! You've got it! You've got high IQ and high EQ and a lot of money and a lot of connections with influential people, and a lot of potential. Corinth, you're killing it! God is so excited to have you on the team now." Instead, Paul actually invites them to reflect on their personal inadequacies. Influential? Not so much. Well born? Great gene pool? Not really. Paul is plain blunt about this. And this is his lead.

Paul doesn't let them off the hook, however. The implications he draws from this are plain remarkable. He doesn't praise them for their abilities and assets. And on the other hand, he doesn't say that they are all so messed up that there is no hope for you. He doesn't say to the believers, "Lower your expectations. Don't dream big. Don't expect to do anything marvelous for God or influential in this world." He doesn't go there. He doesn't say, "Thank God a few of you are rich and smart, and we'll build this church around your strengths." No. No. He says, "You expect great things now because God is up to something that nobody could have anticipated and that nobody could have done but God."

***"But God chose the foolish things..."*** Literally, the text says just the foolish. It could be also the foolish people. ***"...to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him. It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.'"***

Do you see there are two words that are the turning point of this whole passage. They were what changed everything in Paul's life, and they can be the turning point of your life if you let them. They are the words, ***"But God..."***

"But I...can't. But I...am inadequate. But I...don't have enough." "But God..." Paul says. "But God is now doing in you

little group of Christ-followers in Corinth what God already began on the cross with Jesus." That is, overturning human expectations, reversing who matters and who does not, elevating the lowly, changing death into life, turning guilt into innocence, taking what the world regards as total failure and making it into glorious victory. "But God..."

If you carry nothing away from this sermon other than that, I want you to carry those two words, "But God..." away. Let's all say them together out loud with passion. "But God...!"

"But God" means this world does not get the final word on who you are, or what you've become, or what you might do. This world may say your situation is never going to change. The world may say that a lack of education will always embarrass you, that addiction will always enslave you, that depression will always defeat you, that failure will always define you, that your past will always haunt you, that your future will always frighten you. But God says otherwise. But God begs to differ. **But God!**

How do we know this? Is this "but God" stuff just another greeting card, syrupy, feel good, platitude of gobbled-gook? NO! How can you know for sure that God really can – and does today – turn failure into victory, death into life, and guilt into innocence? Because of the cross. You know, because in Jesus, God has done just that for you.

Through a rejected, condemned, carpenter, who was not even a citizen of Rome, God took all your sins and punished them. The price owed was death. And Jesus, stepped into your place to pay. But as true God, He also nailed sin and death to the cross. He overcame the permanence of death by rising again, back to life forevermore. And through simple faith in Him, His victory is yours. Even faith is not your accomplishment, but a gift worked in you by our God of great, great love and power.

Let me read again what Paul declares : ***God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him. It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus***

Don't you see? Friends, God is so lovingly persistent that He overcame any obstacle to save you. This is what He has done for you on the cross. But there's more. This is what God, because of Jesus, still does for you. He wants to bless you with this gift, this fulfillment of hope.

This phrase gets used over and over and over in the Bible. "But God... But God... But God..." Joseph said it to his brothers who sold him (their brother) into slavery. Years later when he understood from a different perspective, he said to them, "***You intended it to harm me, but God intended it for good.***" Guess what. It did great good. God saved His people from that famine, and kept alive His promise to send a Savior through their descendants.

The psalm writer said, "***My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.***"

Jesus said, "***With human beings it is impossible.***" -- forgiveness, getting to heaven, even believing -- is impossible, "***but with God all things are possible.***"

God uses what to the world are foolish, inadequate people and things, so that His deliverance is clearly seen. People can't take credit for it. It's clear it was not our abilities, our status, our smarts, our wealth or influence. No. But God! He did it. He gets the glory, and people God's goodness and then turn to Him because of His powerful love.

So stop excusing yourself, letting yourself off of the hook, whining about your own inadequacy that gets you out of God's calling on your life. "But I... But I... But I..." We all say it. Don't you see how sinful it is to doubt God's love and His power and His ability to work, to save you, to forgive you, to open a new future before you? Take your doubt, take your rationalizations why God can't work for you, or through you, and you confess that sinful lack of faith. Bring it to the cross. Let Jesus' death forgive it all.

Then stop your objections to God. I know this sounds odd. I just don't know how else to put it. God is bigger than your but...(one letter T in that word).

Of course, you're not smart enough! Of course, you're not strong enough! Of course, you're not good enough! But God has chosen the foolish the weak and the lowly and the meek and the timid and the too shy and the too loud and the not very polished and the not very accomplished and the not very connected so that whatever is going on in your heart or in your job or with your family or with your money or with your children or with your health, and it looks really bad, I know. But God...

Yes, sin, death, pain, and hell are real, but they are not final, because the power of the cross and the resurrection has not yet finished remaking the hearts and lives of the people in this sorry world. But God...

Paul brings this to Corinth. But God... He bluntly tells them, "You are lowly, not very wise, not very influential...." That's a slap in the face in our world. But God's ways are not the world's ways. His values turn the world's values upside down. Our world says you aren't good enough, rich enough, strong enough, influential enough. But God says otherwise about every human being. There is nobody too lowly. God is never limited by who you are, your past, your assets or abilities. But God ...

This does not mean there will not be pain in your future. There will. Not all "but God" stories have happy little bows tied on them and every problem works out to a happily-ever-after ending. They don't.

It means we believe with absolute confidence that, yes, pain will come, but God will have the eternal last word.

There were other wannabe leaders and self-proclaimed apostles in Corinth. They tried to pull people away from Paul and the message of the crucified Jesus and the cross. These leaders said they could work greater miracles than Paul. They were way more eloquent than Paul. They attracted these financial backers who gave them all kinds of money.

We would expect Paul, in order to persuade people to follow him and to listen to him, to list his ministry credentials and his achievements, like the huge number of souls saved, so many

churches started, or the number of letters written because he's written more of the New Testament than anyone else.

He does none of that. What he says to commend himself to them is the oddest thing. He says, <sup>24</sup> *Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.* <sup>25</sup> *Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned.* Who brags about that? *Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;* <sup>26</sup> *on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;* <sup>27</sup> *in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.* Good for you, Paul! <sup>28</sup> *And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.* <sup>29</sup> *Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?* <sup>30</sup> *If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.* *2 Corinthians 11: 24-30*

Do you understand these were not sources of success or impressiveness in the ancient world? Not in Corinth.

He lists his failures and his problems and his rejections and his humiliations.

Who talks like this? Who thinks this way? Who views life this way? Paul, you cannot be serious! But he is. He's convinced with Jesus everybody has a source of strength outside of themselves. Everybody has a calling, even the most lowly, so the question is...Are you going to say, "But I," or "But God"? "But I can't," or "But God can."

Did you know that **our church is a "but God" story?** St. Paul Lutheran Church began in February 1875. Within 1 month they had a false preacher take over and almost hijacked the church. Two months later the congregation president got into a fight, resigned his office and left the church. Later that same year they bought a church building, moved it, built a house next door for a pastor and it all burned down. Church and house burned down. None of it was insured. It was a huge loss. If that's how you started a new church

venture today, would you have given up? Probably. They could have said, "But we ..." and quit. Instead, they trusted in God. But God .... And now it's been 149 years of sharing Jesus.

What's your story going to be? "But I..." or "But God ...?" God is loving and powerful. Trust Him always. Don't you give up. Don't you stop praying. Don't you give in to sin. Whatever hurt or heartbreak you're facing, when you feel inadequate (and you will), when you feel unspiritual (and you will), when you are lonely or confused or frightened, when you know you are not smart enough or strong enough or rich enough, when you feel like a loser nobody, but God... But God... But God...

Amen.