

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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ONE LITTLE WORD

Ephesians 2:1-10

Words are powerful, aren't they? They can be used to build up or to tear down, to hurt or to heal, to encourage or to discourage. You know about sticks and stones. Someone said: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will make me go in a corner and cry by myself for hours." Can you identify with that?

On the other hand, as Mother Teresa once said: "Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are endless."

If you're not convinced of the power of words, listen to what the Bible says. Proverbs 18:21 says: "The tongue has the power of life and death." Your words can either kill or give life. They are either poison or balm.

The Bible also says: "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Proverbs 12:18).

And: "An anxious heart weighs a man down (isn't that the truth?), but a kind word cheers him up" (Proverbs 12:25). When worry weighs us down, the right word at the right time can pick us up.

I want to tell you a story this morning that illustrates in its own way the power of words. I'll tell you right up front that it is a pretty silly story. It is a story about a donkey. But this was not just any donkey. It was not your average, ordinary, run of the mill donkey. This donkey belonged to a pastor who had trained the donkey to respond to certain religious words. The only way to make the donkey go, for example, was to say "Hallelujah!" And the only way to get him to stop was to say "Amen!"

The pastor eventually sold the donkey to another man. He explained the donkey's unique qualities to the new owner, who got on the donkey and tried out the instructions the pastor had given him.

"Hallelujah!" the man shouted. And the donkey began to trot.

"Amen!" shouted the man. And the donkey immediately came to a stop.

"Wow!" said the man to himself, "This is cool!"

He went on a trip with the donkey that took them through some mountainous terrain. At one point he found himself heading toward a steep cliff. At that inopportune moment, he had a brain cramp. (Some of you may refer to it as a "senior moment.") He couldn't remember the word to say to make the donkey stop. Not to save his life.

“Stop!” he cried. “Halt!” he shouted. But the donkey just kept going right toward the cliff. “Oh no!” he said. “Uh... Bible... Church... Please stop!” He used all the “religious” words he could think of. But the donkey kept going, closer and closer to the edge of the cliff. Finally, in desperation, the man said a prayer (what a novel idea!): “Please, dear Lord, please make this donkey stop before I go off the side of this mountain. In Jesus’ name. AMEN.”

Hearing the “Amen,” the donkey came to an abrupt stop just one step from the edge of the cliff. The man was so relieved and thankful, he said: “Hallelujah!”

OK, it is a goofy story, kind of a groaner, I know. But do you see how it illustrates not just the power of words in general, but the power of a particular word, in some cases even the power of a little word?

Today I want you to consider with me the power of one little word. It is the word “but.” Just three letters. But it can pack a powerful punch. Those of you who know your grammar know it can be used as a preposition or an adverb, or as a conjunction, connecting thoughts or ideas by showing a contrast between them. Sometimes kids use it in pleading with their parents: “But Mom... But Dad...” Or we may try to justify or excuse ourselves in an argument by saying: “Yes, but...” or “No, but...” What I want you to see today is how central this word “but” is to the gospel – the good news of God’s amazing grace.

It is found all through the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. For example:

Proverbs 12:22: “The Lord detests lying lips (He hates liars), but He delights in those who are truthful.”

Proverbs 14:12: “There is a way that seems right to a man (or a woman or a culture), but in the end it leads to death.”

Proverbs 14:30: “A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.”

Proverbs 14:34: “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.”

Proverbs 19:21: “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”

Proverbs 28:13: “The one who conceals (covers up) his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”

Proverbs 28:14: “Blessed is the man who always fears the Lord, but the one who hardens his heart falls into trouble.”

Proverbs 29:15: “The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself (a child who does not receive proper instruction or guidance or discipline) disgraces his mother.”

Can you see the power of that little word?

Now consider what we find in the New Testament:

1 Peter 5:5 (quoting Proverbs 3:34): “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

1 John 4:10: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

1 John 2:1-2: “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if you do sin – if anybody sins – we have an advocate who speaks to the Father in our defense: Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the world.”

1 Peter 2:10 (which is addressed to God’s elect people, those on whom God has poured out His saving grace in Jesus Christ): “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

There is a big “but” – a “but” of enormous theological importance in 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul lays out the truth of the resurrection of Christ and its implications for us. Listen to the logic of his argument beginning in 1 Corinthians 15:12:

“If it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead (and this is one of the central, essential, non-negotiable tenets of the Christian faith), how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified that He raised Christ from the dead. But He did not raise Him if in fact the dead are not raised.”

Did you catch that “but”? That is not the big one. It is still to come. Paul continues:

“For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ (those believers in Christ who have died) are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all creatures.”

OK, here it comes. Paul has painted a bleak picture, a hopeless picture, in fact, if the resurrection of Christ is not true. But then in verse 20, we come to the really big one. After all the “ifs” and “thens” of the previous verses, Paul says: “But...”

But what? “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead” (15:20). It is an historical fact. So our faith in Christ is not futile. If we have turned to Christ in repentance and faith, we are not still in our sins. As foolish as it may seem to some, our preaching is not in vain. Death does not have the last word. Jesus does.

Do you see how powerful and how important this little word “but” is?

It is also one of the key words in this familiar passage in Ephesians 2, where Paul describes what God has done for us and for our salvation in the person and work of Christ. Listen again to what Paul says beginning in verse 1:

“As for you...” (The “you” Paul refers to here are Gentiles who were outsiders to the covenant God made with the Jews. But what Paul says applies to all of us, to Jew and Gentile alike, as we will see in verse 3. So when Paul says “you,” he means *you*. And *me*. It includes every one of us.)

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air (aka, the devil), the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest (like everybody else), we were by nature objects of wrath” (2:1-3).

Ouch! Not a pretty picture, is it? Not a particularly encouraging diagnosis of our condition. That is why what comes next is so significant. Paul continues:

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love for us (literally it says ‘because of His great love with which He loved us’), made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ” (2:4-7).

Would you believe that in the Greek, the language in which the New Testament was originally written, these seven verses form one very long sentence? The pivotal point in the thought of this long sentence is that little word at the beginning of verse 4 where Paul says: “But,” “But God...”

Don’t gloss over the way Paul describes our spiritual condition – the spiritual condition of every person – apart from the saving work of Christ. He says that we are dead. Spiritually dead. It is not a matter of being spiritually weak or sick or lethargic or drowsy or asleep. No. It is far worse than any of these. The reality is that apart from the saving work of Christ on our behalf, apart from the operation of His saving grace in our lives, we are spiritually dead.

Obviously, you can be physically alive and spiritually dead at the same time. You can be very much alive to the ways and desires and values and lusts and pleasures of this world, and be dead with respect to truly knowing God. I’m sorry to say that is the way it is for millions upon millions of people in the world today. And it may be that way for some of you. But it doesn’t have to be.

The bad news of the gospel is that apart from Christ, left to ourselves and our own devices, we're dead. We are spiritually dead. And the cause of death is our transgressions and sins, which are the result of our natural bent toward sin.

You can be the greatest athlete in the world, and still be dead, spiritually speaking.

You can be the most powerful man – or woman – in the world, and still be dead in your transgressions and sins.

You can be admired – or envied – for your intellect or charisma, for your beauty or talent or wealth, and still be dead to God.

Dead in your sins. *Your* sins. Not somebody else's. Now, if you're dead, what can you do to make yourself alive? What can a dead person do? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

So here is the bad news: Apart from what God Himself has done for us in Christ, we are dead in our sins. We may think we're alive, but there is no pulse, spiritually speaking.

And that isn't all. Not only are we spiritually dead, we also stand condemned. By nature, because of our sin, we are "objects of wrath" (2:3). We deserve nothing other than the perfectly just and holy wrath of God. That is not a pleasant thought, but it is true. If you and I got from God what we really deserve, we would all end up in hell.

But then we come to that little word "but," which tells us that because of God's love and mercy and power, spiritual death and eternal condemnation are not our destiny, if we are in Christ.

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love for us, made us alive with Christ when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved" (2:4-5).

Only God could do it. Only God can do it. Only God can take something dead and make it alive. Only God can take objects of wrath and make them – make *us* into trophies of His grace.

Only God could do it. And He has, as an expression of His amazing love for you and me.

Maybe you've heard it hundreds of times before, but I want you to listen to John 3:16 again, as if you were hearing it for the very first time: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Did you hear that little word "but"? It is in the next verse, too. John 3:17 says: "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."

Not death but life. Not condemnation but salvation.

Do you see how important this little word is? It is at the heart of the gospel.

But God... Were it not for Him and His grace, we really would be of all creatures most to be pitied. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love for us, has drawn us to Himself and made us spiritually alive to Him in Christ. By grace and grace alone are we saved.

I pray it is true in your life. If it is, I pray that you will be encouraged and strengthened by this message from God's Word to press on in your faith with a deeper appreciation of His grace.

If it is not yet true in your life, if you have not yet experienced the saving power of God's love, I pray that you will today. I pray that the truth and power of the gospel will bring you from spiritual death to new life. Only God can do it. And I pray that He will do it in your life today.

John Newton, the slave-trader turned preacher, understood the power of this little word "but." He wrote:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind but now I see.

It is all by God's amazing grace. May you know it in your life, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.