**Big ‘Buts’ of the Bible: The Road to Heaven is Paved with Good Intentions**

**Matthew 6:1-6; 16-18**

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Big ‘buts’ of the Bible. That’s what we are looking at during this time between Christmas and Lent. Even the New York Times Crossword puzzle is getting into the act. In last Wednesday’s puzzle one of the clues was “Big ‘buts.’” The answer was “mammoth caveat.”

Enjoying the double entendre, we are looking at the small, three-letter conjunction that holds complex sentences together by contrasting one clause or thought with another. We take it for granted most of the time, but when it is used, especially in Scripture, it is a prompt to sit up and take notice.

Last week I tried to estimate how many times ‘but’ appears in the Bible. I told you of my failure trying to confer with Google for the exact count, so I resorted to my concordance, and without counting every single reference came up with the understanding that there must be over 4,000 occurrences. Well, Larry Gray is much more adept at manipulating Google, because he did come up with an exact Google count. Understanding that different translations may have varying number of ‘buts,’ Larry found that the King James Version of the Bible has 2192 ‘buts’ in the Old Testament; 1557 in the New Testament; and 738 in Apocrypha for a total of 4487 ‘buts’ in the Bible. Now you know.

We began this series with perhaps the biggest ‘but’ of them all. Jesus was talking with his disciples asking them who people thought he was. Then he turned the tables on them and asked, “**But** who do you say that I am?” Upon the lips of Jesus ‘but’ is a call to action. It’s a game changer. It requires us to act. It leads us either to follow Jesus, or purposefully ignore him.

Last week we looked at how Moses used “but.” He perhaps should be lifted up as the archetype of how most humans use “but.” When God called him out to go to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go, Moses’ immediate response was to throw “but” at God, and outlines why it was not a very good idea. As we mentioned: when Jesus uses “but,” it becomes a game changer. When Moses and other humans chose to throw “but” in the face of God, it is to keep the game from changing. To keep the comfortable status quo instead of acting on faith.

This week we look again at Jesus and the other ways he uses “but”. Jesus is a prolific user of the word. Especially in his Sermon on the Mount from which our passage comes today. Because Jesus has a unique understanding of God, his teachings bring clarity to God’s truth, which means we have to unlearn what we’ve assumed to be the truth. So in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus makes great use of the saying “You have heard it said…, but I say to you…” We may look at one or two of those in a coming sermon.

Today, however, we find Jesus instructing people on how to be pious. Now you and I may have a negative impression of the word “pious.” Or maybe I have a negative feeling toward the word pious and I don’t want to be alone, so I am dragging you in with me. Too often we use “pious” with a negative connotation. “Oh! He acts so pious.” And TV evangelists have given us good reason to turn on this word. They flaunt their faith on TV and speak as though they have God by the tail, and act so piously, only to be humiliated with their own humanity.

That, in part, is Jesus point in the Scripture today. Don’t act pious. Be Pious! Instead of trying to flaunt your virtue for everyone to see, simply be devout, especially when no one can see.

Jesus is very straightforward in the very first verse. “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” Eugene Peterson, in his version of the Bible “The Message,” titles this section, “The World Is Not a Stage.” And Jesus’ point is that your faith should not be a mask that you put on simply to look good. Looking good gets you nowhere, especially with God. Rather, faith should be a way of life that is practiced whether people are looking or not. That should be our intention.

Jesus moves us through several examples making use of that small and mighty “but.”

*“So whenever you give to the poor, don’t sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others,…****But*** *when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

Back when I was in my late teens, maybe early twenties, a friend of mine, Jim Hokenson, and I went to the Assembly of God Church in Adrian one evening. They were having a weeklong revival with an evangelist that came from out of town. We wanted to see what it was like so we went to the service. In typical fashion, when it came time for the offering, the evangelist made of big show of how important it was to give to the ministry he was doing saving souls. In fact he was going to be the first to put money into the offering plate, and he waved a $100 bill around and put it in the plate before the ushers passed the plates around. Easy to do when the offering is going in your pocket anyway.

Contrast that with what the Kresges of K-Mart fame did when this church was built. Stan Kresge, a dyed in the wool Methodist, gave $100,000 to ensure space to be built for student ministries and the Wesley Foundation. Now while there are several things around the country that have the Kresge name on it because of their generosity, their $100,000, which was quite a chunk of change in the 1930’s, was not for recognition, but simply for the love of ministry to our young adults. There is no Kresge Hall or Kresge Lounge here. It is simply the Wesley Foundation.

It’s hard not to be recognized for the sacrifices you make. When we first introduced electronic giving here, which is a blessing for both the church and the giver, it was hard at first because there was a concern of what people might think when you don’t put something in the offering plate. And so we made these laminated cards, which are still in the pews that people can put in the offering plates that say, “I give electronically.”

Now there is a two-fold purpose to them. It is not only a way to show others you are giving money to the church, but also as a way to let others know they can give electronically. But it is hard not to concern yourself with what other people will think.

Jesus is saying it doesn’t matter what other people think. It matters what God knows. It doesn’t do you any good to feel good because others are impressed with you. Rather, does God see your faithfulness?

*“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.* ***But*** *whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

This could be a little harsh on us clergy type, don’t you think? Here we stand in all our regalia. We put on these special robes and stoles; hang big crosses around our necks. We spread our arms and bless people. We do funny things with our hands and fingers as if by so doing you can live long and prosper. We write prayers and use fancy language like the “eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being,” to show off our education or to prove that we own a thesaurus. And we get paid for doing so. Now maybe it is me that is a little harsh.

Prayer is important in our corporate gatherings, large or small. But it is not what we sound like or how clever we can get with our words that are important. Rather, are we genuinely placing ourselves before God? Are we opening our spirit to God’s Spirit? I think one of the mistakes we make with our understanding of prayer is that God doesn’t know what is going on unless we can articulate it with words. It isn’t that God is blind to our needs. I think it is more accurate to say that we are blind to our needs until we can approach God with open hearts. And that is prayer. And it is Jesus understanding that that is most edifying when you can remove yourself from the public view and honestly present yourself before God.

*“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

There probably aren’t too many of us who fast as a spiritual discipline. I have before, and let me tell you, I made sure people knew about it. I’ve also lied about fasting. I may have told this story before. When I was in seminary, I was getting by on very little, as most students do. That’s what ramen noodles were made for, right? For me it was peanut butter. I could go to Dominick’s, which was a grocery store in the Chicago area and by peanut butter in a gallon container for about $5, which I subsisted on.

I was on campus one day, which was a Tuesday. I can remember this clearly, which shows you how guilty I feel about this. I had to stay on campus over the noon hour, so I went to the cafeteria to eat with friends, only I wasn’t eating because I did not bring a lunch and I had no money to buy a lunch. I had friends who offered to buy me lunch, but pride takes over, right? I simply said, “No thank you. Today is Tuesday and I fast on Tuesdays. ” I don’t know why I thought I had to lie about that.

I did fast that Tuesday, but there was nothing very spiritual about it. Had I money, or had I food, I wouldn’t have. So what is it about intentionally going without food that makes it a spiritual discipline?

Well again, for Jesus, it’s not for others to see how holy you are. Rather, it is for those who honestly want to place themselves before God. When one feels the pangs of hunger we are reminded of a couple of things – how totally reliant we are upon God, and how we do not need to be a slave to our worldly cravings. It helps us prioritize what is truly important.

Here’s the bottom line for me as I read this passage. Jesus was very keen on giving freely what we have, praying without ceasing, and practicing spiritual disciplines like fasting. But in and of themselves, they are nothing. Practicing such piety for show is a no go with God. Rather it is what you intend with such action.

You’ve heard it said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I think that is wrong. The road to heaven is paved with good intentions. I think you can do good things with bad intentions, and that is not what God is looking for.

To paraphrase Jesus. Someone could give a lot of money to help the needy. But if their intention is for the tax write-off or to be seen favorably by society, then they got the reward they were looking for, but that is not something God rewards. So Jesus offered a mammoth caveat: Do these things, **but** do them with the intention to grow in the love and grace of God.

I pray that will be true in your life and in mine. Amen.