

But...

Titus 3: 3-8

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Today's scripture is from the book of Titus Chapter 3 verses 3-8. Paul wrote three Pastoral Epistles, First and Second Timothy and Titus. These were written to individuals instead of to particular churches. Titus was a young Greek convert of Paul's whom Paul sent to the island of Crete to start the church there. This letter is Titus' commission to train and build up leaders for the new church. Paul wants these new leaders to know who they are, and how they are to act. How they are different.

Hear Paul's words to Titus...

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is sure.

I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone."

This is the word of the Lord...Thanks be to God.

One hinge of this message, a short word that draws our attention and holds it is BUT. A simple conjunction, that holds our attention because it contradicts how we usually find it. But is used as a conjunction that indicates the next clause will contradict the previous one. As in “I don’t want to bother Sean in the middle of his conversation, but I want to introduce you.” In the first clause of the **sentence**, I say I don’t want to bother Sean in the middle of a conversation. The conjunction "**but**" indicates that I am probably going to anyway.

When the two clauses don't strictly contradict each other, we leave it to our audience to fill in the implied meaning, and when we are not clear and leave it up to the other person to apply the meaning they wish, it can negate the first clause completely. We typically hear what we want. As in my favorite use of the word **but** with my children when they were growing up...

If one of them was saying the same sentence to me, “I don’t want to bother Sean, but I want to introduce someone to him.” I would remind them that, “There is only one big but in our house and it is mine. If you don’t hear the answer you want, it is not there.” It would be “I don’t want to bother Sean.” There is no ambiguity.

But, I wish I had read this text earlier in my parenting life. I would have used it like Paul does here. To contrast how we are not to behave with a behavior we should follow, such as “I know you want to introduce Sean, **but** you should wait until he is finished so as not to bother him.”

In Paul's letter to Titus, in this teaching and training of leaders for the church, Paul gives them the reason why they are not to follow their old ways, the ways of the culture; **because** they are new creations in Christ through God's radically abundant grace and love through the death and resurrection of Christ. Here the two clauses do contradict each other, we are not left to fill in any implied meaning. Paul is very clear.

Paul uses this as a reminder of the sacrifice given for this new life, and how that changes who they are and how they are to present themselves. The words Paul uses, we were once "foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another," contain nothing that sounds new. The old behaviors make us feel uncomfortable and dead, not alive. They are not life giving, **but** life draining.

But the life we have in Christ frees us from all that. The **but** Paul uses breaks off the negative and brings us face to face with what was, and what now is. There is no question as to how our character is now to be.

In our discussion in the women's Bible study we talked about how we do not always behave as that new life calls us to live. That we still continue to sin. Are we ever to be who God calls us to be? Is there no hope? We just keep slipping back.

That's why every week in worship we have the opportunity to confess our sins and are given the chance to continue trying. **But** this also shows us the

abundant love and grace of God. We are not expected to be perfect, but there is the expectation that we keep trying.

In Romans 6:1-2 Paul uses a rhetorical question, "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" to answer this. He is not asking, he is telling because the answer is already in the question. If our body of sin is gone, if it is dead, we can no longer sin.

Again we need to remember the words of Paul, Christ saved us, we had nothing to do with it, and he did it through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. I am a sinful person, **but** through my baptism and Christ's grace I cannot sin." We need to own the behavior.

Transformation of character begins in the water of baptism. We get the opportunity to remember every week in worship, and especially on Sunday's when we have a baptism. Today is typically a baptism Sunday, and even though we do not have a baptism, it is a great opportunity to remember. The font is up front to keep the memory of our baptism front and center. We are called to remember our baptism in the words of the liturgy we use at baptism, "And gracious God, touch us all with the grace of our baptism. Give us new lives to replace all that has grown tired and stale and dead in our lives so that we may remain forever in the number of your faithful children; through Jesus Christ our Lord." The font is our reminder notice.

Christ used everyday elements to keep our sacraments right in front of us, to remember more than just on Sundays. Bread we eat and touch and see every

day, it is to always remind us of the sacrifice Christ made for us, not just on the first Sunday of the month. Remember “the bread of life.”

And the water of baptism. It keeps us alive! We put our hands in water throughout the day. Do we feel the spirit as the water runs through our fingers? Or is that only when the water is poured into the font at Baptisms? I would love to see the font full of water, standing in front of us every day.

There is a font in a church in Pennsylvania that looks like a well, and it stands at the back of the church, so that as you walked in you “pass through the waters.” You literally enter into our story each time you walk into the sanctuary. Not only was it always filled with water, but it is a continually running fountain. The water rises up from the bottom causing it to cascade over the rim of the bowl. The abundant grace of God literally cannot be held in a vessel, it continues to pour out and overflow. That is what God’s grace and love is like. An eternal fountain that never runs dry.

I must admit that water doesn’t always make me think of my baptismal vows. But, I keep trying and when I see the image of water as the life giving grace of Christ it is powerful. One morning after a rainstorm while I was on a retreat in the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania, I came across a rock with a hollow spot on the top. As I got closer, I could see that the hollow space was filled with water. It was a naturally formed baptismal font. As I continued my walk that morning, and throughout the week, I looked for more examples of these baptismal waters in nature, and I found them, in large and small rocks, on the fronds of large plants. Baptism stayed front and center for me that week.

Watching my grandsons splash in the water of their kiddie pool yesterday also reminded me of baptism. I think a big part of that is the joy the water brings, it's the joy of what our baptism is, the cleansing of the old ways that hold us back, and cleansing us to live into a new life in Christ.

As I was writing this week, I kept coming back to our font here and our call to go out into the world. I thought of going to the font and pouring a few drops of water into the bowl, and asking is this what God's grace is like, are these the waters of our baptism? And then to bring in a hose and begin filling the font. Is this what God's grace looks like? Or is God's grace like leaving the hose on and allowing the water to spill over the side, to make its way through the sanctuary, down the steps and out to the street? To flow out to our neighbors near and far. If we continued to let it run, can you image who it would touch? Who the grace of God would nourish, **but** it would nourish us too as that grace flowed over us and we followed its flow?

In baptism we become new creations and our lives are to change. We are to live new lives and love our neighbor, to do the good works Paul writes to Titus about. Isn't part of our doing good works, working on living into the likeness of Christ? Working to not continue to sin. Working on this together. Nancy spoke in her last sermon about pitching our tents in the land of hope. Isn't this our hope too? That our sin will decrease as we live into lives as Christians? If we were already perfect, where would the hope be?

We are called to move out into the world, to spread the gospel. This is hard work so we need to also come back in to be nourished and equipped for that

service. In baptism we commit to helping parents raise their child in the faith, I love the image of us doing that for each other as well.

Hear the words of the baptismal liturgy once again. Please pray with me.

As we set apart this water from a common to a sacred use, pour out your Spirit upon us and on this water so that by your power, what we say may be your word and what we do may be your work; that your children, buried with Christ in baptism, may rise with him to newness of life. And gracious God, touch us all with the grace of our baptism. Give us new lives to replace all that has grown tired and stale and dead in our lives so that we may remain forever in the number of your faithful children; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen