

LIVING
IT OUT



**DAILY
BIBLE
STUDY**



CEDARCREEKCHURCH

The Secret to Spiritual Freedom

Monday, August 7, 2017

Every morning, I wake up before my wife, daughter, and son. I love spending this quiet time with God - reading his word and praying to him. This time of communion with God is one to which I look forward every day. There's another part of this time, however, that I love.

The interruption.

My two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Ruby, wakes up every morning roughly an hour into this time. At this point, I'm usually praying. She will quietly walk up to me and gently interrupt my prayer with the same whisper:

Daddy? I want pancakes.

She, like her daddy, is a creature of habit. And every morning, while I am reading or praying, she quietly eats her pancakes.

One of my habits - as she knows - is reading. Usually, after my time with God has finished, I read a little from some book. Just a few days ago, my book was laying out on the table, and as I got up to attend to her baby brother, Easton, she climbed onto my chair and grabbed my pen.

And she colored in my book.

As I walked back into the dining room, I saw her "pretending to be daddy," pen-in-hand and "reading" the book.

When she heard me coming in, she quickly dropped the pen.

I walked over, noticed the scribbles in the book, and asked, "Ruby, did you color in daddy's book?"

"No," she replied.

"I just want you to tell me the truth," I said.

"I didn't do it."

We went back and forth for about two minutes until eventually, through choked back tears, she admitted what she did.

I picked her up and squeezed her (I hate seeing her cry) and told her that I loved her very much and that I liked it when she told me the truth.

She pulled away from the hug and looked at me and said, "You're not mad?"

"Well, I wish you wouldn't have colored in my book, but I like that you told me the truth."

Her eyes lit up, and she said, "Thank you, Daddy!"

I had an opportunity at that moment to express frustration at her coloring in my book, or disappointment in her lying to me at first; but for some reason, I chose to give her mercy.

It's important to note that I have not even come close to figuring this out. Far too often, I wish I could rewind the clock and show my kids mercy - or patience - rather than frustration and impatience.

I do know, however, that it is far better to give mercy to my children than to show my frustration with them. I know this because when I show them mercy, while still letting them know how I wish they'd behave, it frees them to act in a way that they know will make their mother and me happy simply because they want to. (Disclaimer: I know this is not a perfect plan, my children are human.)

When I reflect on why I should show mercy, I can't help but think about where mercy comes from: God.

This past weekend, Perrysburg Campus Pastor Tom Martin spoke on the topic of mercy.

His main point was, *When I realize that God is **merciful**, I discover that I am **free**.*

He pointed us to a person in the New Testament, Paul, to illustrate this principle.

Paul's former name was Saul. He grew up in a Jewish family and trained under one of the most famous Rabbis, Gamaliel. He was a Pharisee, meaning he was very well educated in the law and passionate about upholding it.

Paul was present during the killing of Stephen - the first Christian martyr. In the book of Acts, Luke records Paul as having "agreed completely with the killing of Stephen" (Acts 8:1). After this killing, Paul was going from house to house, "dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison" (Acts 8:3). He was so zealous about squashing this Christian movement, that he "requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them - both men and women - back to Jerusalem in chains" (Acts 9:2).

Simply put, Paul wasn't a good guy. He was an angry, bloodthirsty, merciless creature.

Then, God showed him an overwhelming amount of mercy. Though Paul was spending his days terrorizing Christians, God saved him from his sins and called him to a life teaching the Gospel.

He called Paul to a new life, one in which he would become - arguably - the most prolific Christian pastor in human history.

Imagine, though, what it would've been like to be Paul. His past was nothing to be proud of; in fact, it was in opposition to his life's mission.

Imagine watching many people come to know Jesus, all-the-while knowing that just a few years before this, you would have killed them for the very same act.

Paul is a perfect case study in God's mercy.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, he wrote,

¹³No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us. (**Philippians 3:13-14**)

In this text, we find our principles for freedom.

Notice what he writes in verse 13: "*I focus on this **one thing** ...*"

What is the one thing?

"Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead."

If anyone in the history of the world wanted to (needed to) forget his past, it was Paul.

As Tom said, when we realize God is **merciful**, we discover we are truly free.

Paul, who understood God's mercy on his life, had to **forget** the past. He knew that God - through Christ - had forgiven him.

As Tom said, he had to **drop** his past. He had to leave it behind. The threats, the arrests, the terrorizing, the killing, all of it had to be left behind.

He then had to **replace** those negative memories with what lies ahead. He had to **focus** on the heavenly prize: Jesus.

No matter your past, Jesus offers an unending amount of mercy. He is calling us to **drop** the sins of our past and no longer allow them to weigh us down and **replace** the weight of those sins with the freedom of knowing what lies ahead: Jesus.

Finally, we have to **move forward**.

We know that we can leave our past behind us. Because of God's mercy, we do not have to carry that weight anymore. God has also given us a mission, and even if we drop the past and replace it, it will still be around to haunt us if we don't **move forward**.

This was the call on Paul's life.

This is the call on all of our lives.

We have all desperately needed God's mercy, and he has generously given it to us. Now, we need to **drop, replace, and move forward**.

Why is God's mercy sometimes so hard to understand?

Why do you think so many of us struggle to live in the truth that God has given them mercy?

You have been given mercy, so now it's time to move forward. Part of that is showing mercy to others. To whom can you show mercy to today?

Prayer:

*Heavenly Father, thank you for your gift of mercy. I know that it is an endless gift, one that you continue to give to me. Help me to live in that freedom daily. Help me to **drop** my past, **replace** it, and **move forward**. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

This post was written by Andy Rectenwald, the Director of the LivingItOut Bible Study.

These Two Words Change Everything.

Tuesday, August 8, 2017

Our lives are filled with people, experiences, and gifts that we may value but still not fully appreciate.

It's easy, for example, to take for granted that the sun will rise each morning. While many of us appreciate the beauty of the sunrise as dawn breaks, when was the last time that you paused to reflect upon how fortunate we are to have a sun that warms us, provides light, and sustains our physical existence?

Other elements of our lives, such as our youth, our relationships, and our health are more provisional and often not fully appreciated until they fade away.

Within the context of our spiritual walk, one of the most incredible gifts of which we are assured is that of a merciful God. The Bible contains dozens of verses that define and depict the glory of God's mercy.

In Ephesians 2:4-5, the Apostle Paul writes, "But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!)"

As followers of Christ, we know that we are forever assured of God's mercy in exchange for our commitment in belief. But progressing from simply knowing about God's mercy to *fully appreciating* the depths and benefits of his remarkable gift requires that we also consider the circumstances that accompany it.

In Week 5 of the "God Is" series, Perrysburg Campus Pastor Tom Martin examined the glorious reality of our merciful God. The big point of this week was: **When we realize that God is merciful, we discover that we are free.**

The verses that immediately precede Ephesians 2:4 provide invaluable context for the indelible and undeserved gift of God's mercy:

¹Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. ²You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil – the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. ³All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature, we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else. **(Ephesians 2:1-3)**

In his commentary on Ephesians 2, minister and author Matthew Henry explains, "We have here a lively picture both of the misery of unregenerate men and of the

happy condition of converted souls, enough to awaken and alarm those who are yet in their sins and to put them upon hastening out of that state, and to comfort and delight those whom God hath quickened, with a consideration of the mighty privileges with which they are invested.”

In short, Henry speaks to the link between the necessity for God’s mercy and our appreciation for the depths of the privileges it provides to us as believers.

In his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul explained that we were once:

- Dead because of our sins;
- Living in sin;
- Obeying the devil;
- Refusing to obey God;
- Following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature; and
- Subject to God’s anger.

This is who we were before God gave us his mercy. And this is what makes the passage, “but God is so rich in mercy, ...” so important!

Anytime we are tempted by our sinful nature, and every time we are reminded of our sinful past, we need only remember the words, "But God" to appreciate the gift of his mercy.

This is not about forgetting or minimizing the significance of our sins. Nor is it about dwelling on our sins or surrendering to what may sometimes feel like the inevitability of their recurrence.

Rather, the words, “But God” should serve as a trigger to help us frame our minds around the freedoms and opportunities that God generously affords us through his mercy. With God’s mercy, we are free to embrace the treasure of his gift, to move further into intimacy with him, and to recommit ourselves to walking with God and away from sin.

When was the last time you considered the priceless worth of God’s mercy?

Do you ever find yourself stuck in regret over past sins, or frustrated by the temptation of your sinful nature?

If so, what are some ways you can leverage the words “But God,” to move forward in freedom?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for the underserved (and thus often underappreciated) gift of your mercy. Help me to remember the words “But God” and appreciate the glorious freedoms that you have bestowed on me as a believer. And help me to embrace the entirety of your gift as I walk forward with you and away from my sinful past. Amen.

God Can and Has Used Your Past. My Story:

Wednesday, August 9, 2017.

I would imagine that I am not the only one who has, "[A funny thing happened on the way to the forum](#)" life. The first year Mike (my husband) and I took off in our motor home, our water pipes froze. We didn't know it until we got to New Orleans because it was only there that it was warm enough to hook up to water. We watched in disbelief as the water sprayed all over the street under the RV. If it weren't for Mike's skill and persistence, we would have spent a boatload of money having someone fix the numerous breaks in the PVC pipe. As it was, we had no water inside for the first two weeks of our trip as he fixed the leaks, one by one. Finally, somewhere in Texas, he found and fixed the last one! I began emailing family and friends with "Trials and Travails" in the subject line since that was only the first of our many adventures in our three months on the road. I was very grateful that I could say, "This happened, but Mike...!"

I think of the phrase "But God" pretty often. I was 43 years old when I came to know Jesus as my Lord and Savior. I had lived a lot of life before him. I remember well what my life was like before him. I was all those things talked about in yesterday's LivingItOut:

- Dead because of my sins
- Living in sin
- Obeying the devil
- Refusing to obey God
- Following the passionate desires and inclinations of my sinful nature
- Subject to God's anger

It's amazing how well the Apostle Paul could describe me so accurately! Some days it seems like a distant memory, but other days something will rise up from the past to remind me that I haven't always lived a God-honoring life. I still have some rough days, and some consequences are unavoidable. It's then that I want and need to remember:

⁴But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, ⁵that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) Ephesians 2:4-5

That's the great thing! It doesn't depend on me! **It's God** who is rich in mercy. **It's God** who gave me life when he raised Christ from the dead. It's only by **his grace** that I have been saved.

God left me alone to come to the end of myself, but he never left me. I see now that he had a plan and a purpose for everything that happened to me, most

times as a result of my own poor choices. He has used my experiences of brokenness and being lost, more times than I can count, to help me relate personally to the woman or man in front of me. While I wouldn't advise inflicting pain and hurt on yourself, I feel with all my heart that God's mercy is a well that for me has never run dry. I experience his love, as wonderful and unbelievable as it is, every time I think of Jesus, of what it cost him to come. "But God" is the phrase that makes life hopeful for me. He isn't done yet. In the hard place, in the horrible diagnosis, in the lost job or relationship or home, in the mistake you think can never be excused, there is always a "But God."

He is the God of miracles, of second, third, fourth, fifth... chances.

He is a God of infinite promise. Joshua 21:45 says, "*Not a single one of all the good promises the Lord had given to the family of Israel was unfulfilled; everything He had spoken came true.*" and 2 Corinthians 1:20 says, "*All of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding 'Yes!' And through Christ, our Amen (which means Yes!) ascends to God for His glory.*" When you know the God who always shows up on the other side of "but," you can move forward in your life with confidence that this God has your back!

What are your "But God" stories? Write one down and share it with a friend this week.

Prayer:

Lord God, how thankful I am for your tender mercies, new every morning. Your faithfulness brings peace to my life regardless of my circumstances. I would be nothing and nowhere, but God I praise and worship you, my King. Amen.

A Renaissance Artist and a Promise from God.

Thursday, August 10, 2017.

Back in the beginning of the 16th century, one of the world's most famous artists was commissioned to create one of the most memorable pieces of art in human history. He began this project at 26 years of age, and it took him just about [three years](#). The entire time he sculpted his masterpiece, he did it in [secrecy](#).

Then, it came: the day on which he would reveal his masterpiece. It's intended location was roughly [260 feet in the air](#) in the Cathedral of Florence.

When he presented his piece of art, it stood 17 feet tall and was absolutely breathtaking.

So breathtaking, in fact, that the board of the Cathedral decided it needed a different, more public location. They convened a large committee with various people including legendary artist Leonardo da Vinci. They eventually decided to place the sculpture in the "[political heart of Florence, Piazza della Signoria](#)."

To this day, it is the most famous sculpture in human history.

We're talking, of course, about Michelangelo's *David*.

It's tough to fathom how human hands could sculpt something like *David*, but sure enough, they were the hands of the young Michelangelo.

David was a masterpiece to Michelangelo.

Imagine how it must've felt to reveal this statue knowing its brilliance and then to be told that it was so amazing it needed to be front and center somewhere. Michelangelo must have been proud of his statue. It was, most certainly, his masterpiece.

Surely people wouldn't speak with Michelangelo without mentioning *David*.

It could be argued that Michelangelo pointed to *David* as one of his prized creations.

Roughly 1,500 years before this masterpiece, the Apostle Paul, in a letter to the church in Ephesus, spoke of another masterpiece.

He wrote: *For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago (Ephesians 2:10).*

The Greek word that Paul uses here is *poiēma*, and it literally translates to “workmanship,” or “that which has been made.” The only other place in the New Testament where we see the word *poiēma* is in Romans 1:20, where Paul writes, “For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.”

The phrase, “everything God made” is how the New Living Translation renders our word *poiēma*. In this context, the things that God has made are the things by which he communicates his invisible qualities. It’s his mode of communication.

When, in Ephesians 2:10, Paul uses the same word, he is telling us that we are the *things* which God uses to communicate something.

This is where we come to today’s Scripture. It’s just a few verses before we encounter the word *poiēma*.

Ephesians 2:6-7

“For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

First, we see that God raised us from the dead *with* Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms. We don’t have the space to discuss what this means here, but what we do know is that even though we are not in heaven now, we experience some measure of heaven as Christians due to God raising us from our former state (dead) into life with Christ.

He made us - spiritually dead people - into living vibrant creatures.

But why? In verse 7, Paul tells us.

He created us - his masterpieces or workmanship - to point to us as *examples* of his mercy.

You. Me. All Christ-followers are what **God** points to as examples of his incredible mercy.

As we've discussed earlier this week, for us to receive mercy, we have to know we've done something wrong.

What most people don't know about Michelangelo's *David* sculpture, is that the single block of marble he used was previously *unwanted*.

40 years before Michelangelo began his work, two different artists were commissioned for projects using the same block of marble. Both abandoned their projects, and one of the artists did so because [the marble was too difficult to work with.](#)

Michelangelo stepped in and took something that had laid dormant - dead - and brought it to life. It is something that for over five centuries we have pointed to as a masterpiece.

God, in his infinite mercy, took us - spiritually dead - and made us alive with Christ so he could point to us as *his masterpiece*; so he could show everyone *how merciful he is*.

We cannot, as God's masterpieces, sit dormant. He created us for a purpose. We are God's *poiēma*. He made us to show everyone how merciful he is.

Even when we feel *unwanted*;

Even when we've been told we're *too difficult*, too messy, or too much trouble;

We can know that we have a Heavenly Father who has generously lavished his mercy on us.

This realization is freedom.

How should the realization that we are God's masterpiece affect the way in which you view yourself?

What can you do today - as God's masterpiece - to be an example to those who don't know Jesus?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your wonderful grace. You are more than good to me; you are more than kind to me. I want, as your masterpiece, to shine for the world to see. I want the world to know how merciful you are. Help me to be a blessing to those around me. Help me to tell others this same message. Amen.

This post was written by Andy Rectenwald, the Director of the LivingItOut Bible Study.

Your Purpose, Explained.

Friday August 11, 2017

Like my mother wrote on Wednesday's LivingItOut, I too, have spent a lot of years dead in my sin. I also have been saved by God's grace and mercy. Even though I was saved a few years before she was (I was only 38! LOL), I didn't understand for a couple more years what it *meant* to be saved by grace and to experience the gift of God's incredible mercy. What a gift! And to think that he gave this to us, even when we were still in our sin because he loves us so deeply.

When I started to understand this gift of grace, everything in my life began to change. When the comprehension that this whole existence is one big, huge, epic love story finally dawned on me, I felt my heart begin to melt, and then beat stronger, and I just wanted to love back. When I believed that God had created me anew, as his masterpiece, to love him and to love others, that became the greatest gift I could ever receive. And it is all about receiving. If I don't believe and receive, I cannot possibly live out God's purpose for my life.

I feel like we often get so caught up in looking for that purpose when Jesus points it out so clearly in the gospels. I like the version in Matthew 22 the best because he takes it a step further:

³⁷Jesus replied, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."

It's so simple! But, it certainly is not easy sometimes. If I don't first accept the fact that God loved me enough to send his son to die for me even when I didn't deserve it, how can I love someone else who doesn't deserve it? I think we get stuck on this one. Someone hurt me or did me wrong, and they don't deserve my love. Well, I sure am glad that God didn't say that about me! I didn't deserve it, even though I always thought of myself as a pretty good and loving person, there was a lot of sin in my life. I hurt people, I hurt myself, and nothing I ever did right could change the things I did wrong. God's gift of grace alone set me free. I certainly realize that it isn't a reward and I will try to never take it for granted.

When we realize that God created us to love him and to give him glory as our creator – the masterpiece pointing back to the master; and to love others, the other masterpieces – everything else falls into place. Verse 40 in Matthew chapter 22 says that *all* the other laws and demands of the prophets are based on this two-for-one command. If we can just get this right, everything else falls into place. This is the good work that we should do for the Lord. This is how we bring him glory and thanks for the amazing gift of grace.

Take some time to think about yourself as a masterpiece, such as Michelangelo's David or Davinci's Mona Lisa. What does it feel like to think of the God of the universe taking that kind of care to create you?

What can you do today to thank him for this extraordinary gift? Is there someone who you believe doesn't deserve your love that you could choose to love anyway?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for creating me anew through your Son. Thank you for showing me how to love by first loving me, even when I didn't deserve it. Help me to bring glory to you by loving you and others the way you love me. Amen.