

**Christmas Celebration:** Can you believe that we're less than three weeks away from Christmas? This is hands-down my favorite time of the year...love spending it with family and friends, and believe it or not, I love spending it with you!

**This year...we're planning a Christmas Celebration unlike anything we've done in the past...and because it's out of the ordinary for us, I want to take a moment to explain it in the context of where we're at this fall!**

Each week, during our *Questionable Life* series, we've been trying to show you that when the gospel of God's grace goes to work in your life, it will produce in you characteristics and habits that your friends and neighbors may consider curious.

You see...when you begin looking for ways to bless people (as we've been encouraging you to do). So, you're actively blessing others through random acts of service and kindness for the simple purpose of bringing joy into their lives or to alleviate a burden, people are going to think you're weird!

**Market Basket** – Last year...in the week leading up to Thanksgiving, someone generously gave Beth and I grocery gift cards...and we have a big family and food doesn't last long at our place so it was a great gift! Days later, we were in the checkout line at a local grocery...and there was a young gal with two kids behind us and they were just losing it! Screams and tantrums because they weren't getting something they wanted! I could tell that the mother was getting frustrated and embarrassed, and I'm not lying when I tell you that my first reaction was, 'my goodness lady, let's put a lid on this!' **Very ungracious and embarrassing...but I'm your pastor, so you need to know what you're getting!** But...then, I sensed the Holy Spirit nudging me to give her one of our three gift cards! So, \$100...and I didn't really argue with the Holy Spirit, which is strange for me. Instead, I turned to her and said something like, "*We'd love for you to have this gift card.*" And she's like, 'no...and I say yes...and she says "*Really?*" And I'm like, "*The Holy Spirit is telling me to do this...so you can argue with Him, but He's going to win.*" (I didn't say that!) So I gave her the card, and she turned around to explain to her husband what had just happened...and they looked at me like I was the weirdest thing they'd ever seen and all they could say was, '*Thank you!*' And all I could say was, "*Have a great Thanksgiving!*"

**This week, try randomly blessing someone in response to the Holy Spirit's leading, and there's a good chance they're going to think you're different. Test me on this!**

Here's another one...when you begin to invite people into your life by opening your home and sharing meals, and there around the dining room table you listen to their story so you can know, encourage, and support them. Listen, you're going to be strange...and yet...strangely attractive at the same time!

Finally...when you begin practicing Jesus-honoring generosity and compassion as we've talked about for the last two weeks...people will take notice!

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And over time they'll ask questions and God will begin to open doors of opportunity for you to proclaim the greatness of Jesus!

**The Apostle Paul wrote about this in Colossians chapter 4...it's the verse behind this entire series!  
Read it with me!**

*"Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone."* Colossians 4:5-6

**Paul writes, "Make the most of every opportunity."**

So, when we considered what it might look like to 'make the most of every opportunity' this Christmas, it might seem crazy to you, but we began to imagine what could happen if we actually put the things we're learning into practice!

So...we're taking Harbor's Christmas Eve services and bumping them up three days to the weekend of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>. **Why?** We believe it's very likely that your friends and neighbors who are probably busy on Christmas Eve might consider joining you for a Christmas Celebration the weekend before! So...we're asking you to invite people to join you for one of our worship gatherings...and we're praying that every person who walks through our doors that weekend encounters Christ and the HOPE he brings in a personal way.

Then...we're looking at Christmas Eve and we're asking, what if each of us spent part of our Christmas Eve blessing other people! What if we invited people into our homes to spend Christmas Eve with us? What if we shared our resources with someone in need? What if we surprised a neighbor or stranger with an anonymous gesture of kindness or generosity?

It would probably be *Questionable!* Which is good because it's what we're hoping and praying for!

Now...we've got two weeks left before our Christmas Celebration, so let me share where we're going because this week and next are going to be a *Part 1, Part 2* experience...

**In the text we just read together from Colossians 4, Paul implies that as you embrace every opportunity to live out your love for Jesus, people are going to question why you live this way! Why you bless people? Why you're hospitable and generous? Why you listen and care for people so well? Then he writes...when they ask...**

*"Be ready to have the right response for everyone."*

**What does Paul mean by, "have a right response?"** In another letter, the Apostle Peter explains this further...

*“You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks you about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it.” 1 Peter 3:15*

Taken together, Paul and Peter are saying... **“When people question your life...be ready to explain your life!** Be prepared to tell someone why Jesus matters to you. What He has done to make you a different man or woman than you were yesterday!

**Always be ready to explain your hope in Christ!**

So...the question becomes, *“How do we explain the hope we have in Christ?”*

**I want to spend these two weeks answering that question!** Next week, we’ll look specifically at how we can explain our hope in Christ in an understandable and meaningful way. But first, I want to show you that if you belong to Jesus Christ, you have a story of hope to share!

**And...to effectively share your story you must first understand your story!**

So...we’re going to look at what I believe is one of the best places in Scripture that gives us a framework for understanding our own personal story.

If you’re taking notes...this text shows us three essential parts to every story! First...there’s the **Before** part of our story! Next, there’s the **But** moment! Finally, there’s a **Now!**

**#1 – Before...**

**Go with me to 1 Timothy 1:12...**

*“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength to do his work. He considered me trustworthy and appointed me to serve him, even though I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted his people...” 1 Timothy 1:12-13a*

Now...this is the Apostle Paul speaking...the same man who, before Jesus Christ changed his life...spent his life hunting down, persecuting, and killing Christians.

In the book of Acts, chapter 7...Paul (who was known as Saul) witnessed the stoning and execution of Stephen, a leader of the early church, and the text says, *“Saul agreed completely with it.”*

Years later, in his letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul writes...

*“You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion – how I violently persecuted God’s church. I did my best to destroy it.” Galatians 1:13*

**Paul says in no uncertain terms... *"This is what my life was like BEFORE I met Jesus. I was so zealous for my religion that I hated Christians and did everything in my power to crush the church.***

That's Paul's **Before**... and in the same way, if Jesus has changed your life, there is a **Before** aspect of your story that you must understand in order to share your story!

**Story** – We know this to be true because every great story we've heard or seen includes a *Before*...a back-story that gives meaning and context to the rest of the narrative.

**Once Upon a Time** – For the record...Beth and I enjoy watching the ABC television series *Once Upon a Time*! Guys...I know this disappoints some of you because it's not Sports Center, but you're missing out! Each episode tells the back-stories of fairy tale characters before they fell under the curse of the evil queen and were sent to the modern-day town of *Story Brook*. And their lives in Story Brook only make sense when you understand who they were beforehand.

In the same way, your story can only make sense when you understand the back-story! Yet, many of us find it difficult to name this part of our story...and for various reasons!

**Some of us believe our story is too ordinary and mundane!** There's an inherent danger in using Paul's story as a framework for our own, which is that we'll say, *"I'm nothing like Paul! I haven't ever persecuted or thrown anyone in prison or murdered anyone."* He was really bad...and maybe I'm a little bit bad, but not that bad. I've grown up around the church and walked through the sacraments. I work hard. I love my family. Pay my taxes. Most of the time, I try my very best to be kind and loving!

**But...you're missing the point!** In many ways, Paul was a devout, law-keeping, morally upstanding man! He goes on to write, *"I followed the Jewish religion and was far ahead of my Jews in zeal for the traditions of my ancestors!"* (Vs. 13b)

**On one hand, Paul was remarkably good...but he was also terribly bad! There's spectrum there, and you probably fall somewhere between killing innocent Christians and memorizing the Torah word for word with all 600 of its laws. I'm just guessing you're somewhere in here!**

Some of us have believed that our story is too ordinary to share, so we've ignored it! Yet...we can identify with Paul!

**Some of us believe our story is too bad...so we run from it!**

We try to escape it! Some of you don't want to think about your past. You want to believe that if you ignore it long enough, it will just go away! Or you show up here on the weekend and think... *"If I can keep these people from knowing about my story...everything will be ok."*

**But notice that Paul doesn't try to run from his past! Instead, he says, "Here's my dirty laundry. I was a religious fanatic who hated Jesus, and violently hurt people."**

He was willing to honestly share his story, which has been read by billions in the last 2,000 years! My guess is that your story...no matter how bad...hasn't gone viral like that!

**The question we have to ask is...how does Paul so boldly, yet humbly say, "This is the man I was" without cowering in a corner!**

Paul understood who he was before encountering Jesus. He also understood that there was a BUT MOMENT of his story...(turning point).

## **#2 – But...**

Look at verse 13 again...

*"...even though I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted his people. **But God** had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. Oh, how generous and gracious our Lord was! He filled me with the faith and love that come from Christ Jesus." 1 Timothy 1:13-14*

Paul says...something happened that forever changed the trajectory of my life! **God had mercy on me...**

**Mercy:** The word *Mercy* means that God didn't give Paul what he deserved. Paul says, *"I deserved judgment and punishment, but God gave me something else entirely!"*

**Les Miserables** – Do you remember the scene in *Les Miserables* where just days after his release from serving 19 years as a galley prisoner, Jean Valjean stole six silver place settings from the bishop's home where he was staying. Later that night, Valjean was apprehended and returned to the bishop under police guard to face the consequences of his crime. Here he was, caught red handed! There is no doubt he will spend the rest of his life back in prison! But...the moment he saw Valjean, the bishop did what no one expected.

*"Ah! here you are!" he exclaimed, looking at Jean Valjean. "I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?"*

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And Valjean...caught off guard by the bishop's act of mercy, doesn't know what to do...so he says, "*in an almost inarticulate voice, and as though he were talking in his sleep.*"

**"Is it true that I am to be released?"**

**"Yes, thou art released; dost thou not understand?"**

In this one act of mercy, the bishop released the life of a man chained to hatred, mistrust and anger, and enabled Valjean to become a free man, forever changed!

**This is a picture of the gospel!** That, in spite of what we deserve...in spite of what we've done or haven't done...in spite of how tainted our record is, God doesn't give us what we deserve! He gives us something entirely different!

Please hear me...it is so important that you understand this, because it is essential to understanding your own story!

Paul doesn't say... "*I was really bad, but then I came to my senses and decided to start over. I did a lot of terrible things, but then I got religion. I had a really awful, messed-up past but after seasons of repentance and trying harder to obey, I finally became a good person!*" **No...look at verse 15!**

*"This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I am the worst of them all..."* 1 Timothy 1:15-16a

Paul "*I am (not I was...I am) the worst sinner!*" Yet...Jesus came into the world to save sinners like me!

That word "**save**" means **to rescue or free**.

Paul goes on to describe this further in another letter. In Romans chapter 3...

*"For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God freely and graciously declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he **freed** us from the penalty for our sins."* Romans 3:23-24

**Paul is explaining the gospel!** Jesus willingly left His Father's side...clothed himself in humanity and though He was innocent, Jesus died a criminal's death on the cross for sinners.

We deserve punishment, BUT Jesus endured our punishment to bring us back into the Father's arms...

On the cross, Jesus was covered in our sin so we could be covered in His righteousness...and stand before God blameless, pure, and without fault.

**When you come face to face with the mercy of God offered to you in Christ...like Paul, you'll be able to say, *"This is who I was and this is who I am...the worst of sinners...But God had mercy on me!"***

**This is your BUT GOD moment...**

I've shared with you many times that for much of my life I was a self-righteous, condescending, and judgmental legalist to the core! I was on the verge of being ruined by pornography and sexual sin...but God had mercy on me! He rescued me...brought me to a place of faith in Jesus and repentance...he continues to restore in me a clean heart, and fill me with a love for Beth and my children that I would have never had...

That's part of my *BUT GOD* story...what's yours?

*"I was (fill in the blank), BUT GOD..."*

*"I was mean, BUT GOD..."*

*"I was bitter and resentful, BUT GOD..."*

*"I loved my money and career more than Jesus..."*

*"I looked for acceptance in the arms of lovers, but Jesus gave me the only true acceptance that satisfies..."*

*"I was addicted...but God freed me..."*

*"I was stubborn...BUT GOD poured out his mercy..."*

**This is your But-God moment of mercy! But that's not all...there's more!**

### **#3 – Now...**

*"This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life." 1 Timothy 1:15-16*

Do you think it strange that God chose a murderous man full of bitterness, pride, and rage to pen the words that have been read by countless believers for centuries!

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**Why would he do that? Simple...to show what He's able to do in the life of the most wicked of sinners so that we will realize, "Man...if God can do that in Paul's life...maybe He can do the same in mine!"**

Close

**Perhaps you see clearly what God is doing in your life right now...you can name the ways He's shaping your affections, your character, your relationships, your commitments!**

It's also possible that until today, you've felt that you'll always be regulated to some kind of rate-B, JV kind of Christian experience. *"God could never do anything significant in my life!"*

**But don't you see...if you belong to Jesus, God has given you a story of his mercy and power...and He is in the process of re-writing your story right now!**

*"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*

**You are a masterpiece of God's mercy...your past cannot disrupt God's plans for your life! As you walk in Christ, He is preparing you to do the good things he planned for you long ago!**

You have a story to share!

### **Application**

So, this week, I want to encourage you to discover and record your story. So, write down these three words...Before, But, Now!

#### **#1 – Before**

This is what life was like before I met Jesus...get very specific! Write that down...

#### **#2 – But God**

Write down the specific ways that Jesus busted into your life. Remember the people that were instrumental, the circumstances God used to get your attention, or the events that God arranged to draw you to back to Himself.

Go back to the Scriptures that made the gospel come alive to your heart and celebrate them!



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Go back to the people who brought you to Christ and thank them!

### **#3 – Now**

Finally, spend time thinking about this question!

**How is the gospel of God’s mercy shaping me today?**

*Relationships*

*Marriage*

*Money (how I see it)*

*Hurts and disappointments (how I process them)*

*How is God giving me peace...joy...freedom!*

**Answer these three questions, and you’ll be well on your way to sharing your story of hope!**

Finally, listen to how Paul wraps up his story...

**1:17** – *“All honor and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen.”*

Paul comes to the end of his story and busts out in worship! When you see what God has done for you...when you understand that He is re-writing your story in Christ...you will want to worship Him!

**So...that’s what we’re going to do!**

**Pray**