

CHRISTIANS HAVE BIG BUTS

Some years ago, I was talking with a woman whose husband didn't go to church.

- "He doesn't believe in GOD," she said, "but he's a really good guy."
- That's a pretty big "but."
- Still, is it big enough for GOD?

Christians have big "buts." (Oh, stop checking yourself out.)

- We keep looking for loopholes, hoping our big "buts" will convince GOD.
- We tell our lies to each other, but we go to church.
- We are selfish, but we say our prayers.
- We ignore the needs of people around us, but we're not as bad as others.
- Christians have big "buts," and we try to fool ourselves, others, and most of all, GOD.

This is the season of Advent, the season of preparation; but preparing for what?

John the Baptizer called out, "Prepare!"

- So, for what are we preparing?
- And for when are we preparing?
- And how are we preparing?

This season is not just about preparing for Christmas with decorations and shopping.

- It is a time for us to prepare.
- It is at time for us to get ready for the coming of CHRIST.
- Prepare the way of the LORD.

But before we think about "how" to prepare, let's look at how CHRIST comes.

- Certainly, JESUS came 2,000 years ago as the babe of Bethlehem.
- And we believe CHRIST will come again...
  - to establish HIS Kingdom in its fullness,
  - and to take all believers into eternal glory.

But JESUS also told us another way that HE would come.

- In Matthew 25, JESUS says, "When you feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, or visit the sick or imprisoned, you do it for ME."
- Preparing for the coming of JESUS means preparing for anyone who comes in need.
- That's why HE came as a baby...HE came as one in need to help us focus on those in need.

St. Andrew has a strong commitment to serving those in need.

- Through benevolences, support for the Interfaith Food Center, missions, and in many other ways, we seek to serve.
- At the same time, we also know that in many ways we fall short.

Atheists will say, "If there was a GOD, GOD wouldn't allow hunger, or homelessness, or the pandemic, or any of a number of other problems.

- Yet, it is not that GOD allows it.
- GOD has called us to respond to it.
  - And the truth is that we fail to do all that we can to bring food for the hungry, or help to provide adequate housing, or make sacrifices to protect and assist others.
- Actually, one of our best witnesses as Christians is the admission of our own sin...not our big "buts."
- Preparing for JESUS means truly confessing our sins and how we try to cover them up.

We need to be honest—to follow the paper trail of our sin, and admit our fault.

Many years ago, my brother Kirk's girlfriend broke up with him.

- Kirk became so upset that he literally punched a hole through the sheet rock in the dining area wall.
- No, not wanting my parents to find out, he found a calendar and hung it over the hole.
- When my mother asked about the calendar, he said he thought it would be nice for us to have one we could refer to during meals.
- And when the end of the year was coming near, Kirk made sure he found a new calendar to replace the old one.
- He did this every year, through high school and college.

One year, my parents decided to remodel their kitchen area.

- When they removed the calendar and saw the hole in the wall, they blamed it on the workmen and made them patch and re-wallpaper it.
- When I came home from seminary a few months later and saw the new kitchen, I commented on the hole being repaired.
- My parents were surprised and asked how I knew about it since I was gone when the damage was supposedly done.
- It was only then that they found out about my brother's cover up.

Yet because he had failed to confess his sin and honestly admit to what he had done, some workers became victims as they were falsely blamed for the damage.

Everyone in prison will tell you that they are not guilty.

- I wonder, is there anyone guilty in church?
- We may admit that we are sinful, but let's not get specific.

Some of you may be bothered by my saying this.

- "Pastor's just trying to make us feel guilty."
- Well, I'm not trying to lead you into feeling guilty. I'm trying to lead you to forgiveness.
- You can't have forgiveness without repentance.
- You can't have repentance without confession—honest confession of sin.

John the Baptizer said, "Repent for the forgiveness of sins."

- As I've shared before, "repent" means to "turn around and go the other way."
- Run from what you're doing and return to where you should be going.
- Forgiveness requires repentance and honest confession.
- Going the other way will lead you to the forgiveness of JESUS.
- Admitting our sin frees us from the guilt that we may feel because of it.
- And confession allows us to speak to the other big "but."

There is one other big "but" Christians should think about and talk about.

- It is the big "but" of which John spoke.
- The people came to him in the wilderness.
- The crowds followed him and went out to hear him preach.
- Yet with all the attention on him, John spoke the big "but" that we all need to hear, to know, and to announce ourselves.
- But there is ONE greater than I.
- "There is ONE who is so great, I don't even deserve to scrape the gum of the bottom of HIS shoe."
- This is the big "but" we need to hear.
- This is the big "but" we need to know.
- This is the big "but" of which we need to speak.
- This should become our "big but."
- "Yes, I go to church, but it is to worship JESUS."
- "Yes, I say my prayers, but it is to JESUS that I pray."

- “Yes, there may be others who are worse than I am, but all of us have only one hope—JESUS.”

If you look at the start of Mark’s Gospel, you’ll find six little words that can change everything for us.

- These are, perhaps, the most important six words Mark writes:
  - “The beginning of the good news...”
  - His Gospel, his story, is not just “the good news.”
  - If it were, that in itself would be remarkable.
  - But Mark tells us that what he is writing is just the beginning.
  - Certainly, this Gospel leading up to the death of JESUS and the empty tomb is indeed good news.
    - It is good news for all who know their sin and that the consequence of sin is death.
    - It is good news because JESUS has overcome death and that HE, and not death, will have the final word.
  - But this story of GOD’S grace in JESUS, culminating with HIS death and resurrection, is just the beginning.
    - There still is much, much more that GOD has and is and will do.
      - Mark’s gospel is not the whole story of what GOD is doing.
        - JESUS’ life, HIS ministry, HIS death on the cross, and the empty tomb are just the beginning.
        - But the implication of what GOD accomplished through HIS life, ministry, death, and resurrection continue...
          - even right up to and including now!

Even the Christmas story that we’re preparing to hear is not the end of our Advent or even its climax.

- It is just the beginning of GOD’S redemptive work in and through JESUS,
  - and the beginning of our calling to repent and be forgiven,
  - and then to carry on and be vessels for GOD’S ongoing work to love
    - and to bless GOD’S people and world.

Christians have big “buts”!

- Advent is the season for us to repent of our sins.
- Advent is the time for us to set aside our own big “buts” and speak the one big “but” the world needs to hear.
- We are fallen people, but we also have the good news:
  - JESUS is LORD, and JESUS forgives.