

RED LETTER CHALLENGE
BUILT ON THE ROCK

Week 1, Introduction

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” Matthew 7:24-27



This is Easter 1966. That's yours truly on the left, in the red blazer. Looks like I'm stuffing chocolate into my mouth. As I was growing up my family had the tradition of hiding the Easter baskets and we kids would hunt to find them. Some years my basket was in a tricky place – like in the dryer under a pile of clothes. Often, however, my Easter basket was “hidden” in plain sight. It was literally right before my eyes, but I was in too much of a hurry in my hunt for it, that I passed right by it without seeing it.

In this picture, I and my brothers had found our Easter baskets. We were all lined up in front of our house for a nice Easter morning picture. Photos were expensive back then. Taking a picture was a much bigger deal than it is today when we pull out a phone. My Dad had to put this thing called a ROLL of FILM into the camera. He had to put in a one-time use FLASH BULB. There were only 24 pictures that could be taken on a roll of film, and you had to drive it to the store to be developed. You would finally get to see how the picture turned out a week or 2 later. So, here we are lined up, Easter morning, for this momentous picture. Look at our faces. NONE of us are looking at the camera. All of us missed what we were supposed to be doing at that moment.

All of us are to be followers of Jesus. He calls us, “**Come, follow Me....**” *Matthew 16:24* We are to be disciples of Jesus. *Matthew 28:20*. Being a disciple is not only a follower, but also we learn to be like Jesus. We take on His character and teachings.

Like a child hunting for an Easter basket and not seeing it in plain sight, Christians are notorious for missing some of the things God has placed right in front of them.

Like us missing the point of the picture, being completely distracted from what we should be doing – which was looking into the camera - many times as followers of Jesus we are completely missing out on the opportunity Jesus has for us. Jesus gives us the opportunity to be His disciples, but somehow, we never hear, never understand, never “get it.”

How are we doing as disciples, learners of Jesus? Do we think and speak, and act like Him? Does your family see Jesus in you? Your neighbors or co-workers, do they see Jesus’ personality, His concerns, His words in you? Or are we distracted, missing Him?

When I think of Jesus, when you think of Jesus, some of the first words that come to our minds are grace, love, kindness, joy.

If asked you what you think of fellow Jesus followers, we would get a real mixed bag of answers, wouldn’t we. Some say positive things, some say negative things. But friends, the real test is what do the one’s we are trying to reach think? What do they say?

About 10 years ago authors David Kinnamon and Gabe Lyons spent three years polling young, unchurched Americans to find out what they thought about Christians. Millions of young people, they discovered, see Jesus followers as judgmental, hypocritical, anti-homosexual, too political, old-fashioned, out of touch, insensitive, and boring.

Your immediate reaction—like mine—is that this characterization is unfair. Why don't these folks recognize all the good things Christians do, like helping prisoners and the less fortunate in third-world countries? Why don't they notice how the church, not any government system or organization is leading the charge with disaster relief after tornadoes left so many families

homeless? Why don't they give credit to Christians for being the first to start hospitals, orphanages, and nursing homes?

The answer is that, fairly or not, hostile characterizations of us as judgmental, homophobic bigots have stuck. But this is only half the answer. A shocking 50 percent of respondents said they base their negative views on personal contacts with Christians. As the authors write, **"Many of those outside of Christianity ... reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians."**

The fact is that we are broken, we are sinners, and if we take a moment to honestly reflect on how we are doing at representing Jesus, all of us should come to the conclusion that I, and we, haven't always represented Christ well.

Jesus is known for grace. Grace is getting a free gift you don't deserve. Yet, we are known for judgment, which is getting what you do deserve. By definition judgment and grace are opposites. We have missed the mark. We have failed miserably.

Jesus is known for unity, but we are known for division. We've missed the mark.

Jesus is known for His good works, but we are known for our hypocrisy. We've missed the mark.

The Red Letter Challenge was birthed out of a desire to represent the real Jesus. **If we can give the right expression of who Jesus really is, people will fall in love with Him.** Who wouldn't fall in love with a loving, kind, gracious, merciful God? We have to change the picture we are telling of Jesus. Somehow, even in our good intentions, we've not just missed by a little bit. We've entirely missed the mark.

After all that Jesus has done for you, are you content with representing Jesus in the way we have been described? No, of course not! We are called to bring people close to Jesus by how we live, and somehow people are rejecting Christianity by the way that we live. We can't live with that. We aren't satisfied with that! We want to give everything that we possibly can towards changing the image we give of Jesus.

Knowing the grace that He's won for me, knowing the grace that He's given me, knowing how he's changed my life. I cannot and will not just sit back and let this be the picture we show of Jesus. We are missing the mark.

In the 2004 Athens Olympics there was a sharpshooter named Matthew Emmons. Matthew Emmons was far and away the best shooter in the world. Some said he is the best shooter that's ever lived. That year the question was not who is going to win the gold, but who would take the silver and the bronze. Everyone knew Matt Emmons was going to take home the gold.

Rifle shooters are trained to fire between heartbeats. They try to slow their heartbeat down as much as possible and fire in between. Medals are literally won by millimeters. Going into his final shot, Emmons was in first place and all he needed to do to win the gold was hit the target, which for many of us in this room wouldn't be a problem, for the greatest shooter in the world, piece of cake!

With one bullet left to shoot, Matt Emmons needed a score of 7.2 to win his second gold medal of the Olympic Games. On his first nine shots in the finals, Emmons' lowest score was a 9.3. He took careful aim, fired, and sure enough, bull's eye for the American. He did it. Except for one small fact. He actually shot at the wrong target, one lane over, which is known as a crossfire, and got a score of 0.

Afterwards in a press conference, he said he felt great going into his last shot. He said he was more concerned with calming himself down rather than looking at his target. The last time he had cross-fired he said was 6 or 7 years ago. He went from 1st to 8th and didn't even get a medal.

Why do I bring this up? Because Matthew Emmons was literally the greatest shooter in the world but if you don't know what you are shooting for it doesn't matter. If you shoot at or focus on the wrong thing, you'll never hit what you need to hit.

As Christians, we can have the best intentions in the world, but if we are succeeding at things that don't actually matter in our faith, then we can do more harm than good.

If the targets we are hitting are judgmental, divisive, hypocrisy, bigotry, racism, out of touch, old fashioned, and boring, then clearly we are not aiming at the targets that Jesus set out for us.

We've been shooting at the wrong targets. So how do we fix this problem? How do we know what to aim for?

What if we, who are Jesus followers, actually take the words of Jesus and put them into practice? What if we've had the answers all along to what it means to truly effectively follow Jesus? What if we simply put into practice the words He gave to us?

Jesus once said:

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." Matthew 7:24-27

Jesus is saying, "If you want your house to stand up and not to blow over when the winds, or the storm, or the bad, evil wolf comes, practice what I'm preaching. Do what I say." Jesus says in Luke 11:28: **"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."** James, the brother of Jesus, says it even more simply in James 1:22: **"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."**

That's the big idea. To change the picture we are giving of Jesus we are going to take Jesus' words, the ones that are written in red letters in your Bibles, and put them into practice. *Literally*. That's the very unoriginal yet revolutionary idea that's going to change not just the followers of Jesus, but the world in which we live!

Jesus has called us to be his disciples, to represent Him. **Following after Jesus is not a burden, but the greatest single opportunity of our lives.** And the stakes are too high and too important for us to simply be going through the motions and not knowing if we are effective or not. So, welcome to the Red Letter

Challenge paints the target for us. The target is Jesus' words. The Red Letter Challenge is simply putting Jesus' words into practice.

Jesus spent most of His time talking about these 5 principles: Being, Forgiving, Serving, Giving, and Going.

1) Being: So many times Jesus talks about the importance of spending time and just being with Him. Before He invites us to do things *for* Him, *through* Him, *in* His name, He first invites us into a relationship. Our relationship with Him will determine how effective we are at actually doing the things Christ asks.

2) Forgiving: Jesus is all about grace. So many of us struggle with receiving God's forgiveness, forgiving ourselves, or forgiving others. To truly represent Jesus in this world, we receive, understand, and apply God's grace in our own lives, and then extend God's grace to others.

3) Serving: After spending time being with Him, and receiving His forgiveness, now we are so motivated. After all that He's done for me, I want to serve Him. I want to get out into the community, help those in need, love my neighbors, etc.

4) Giving: Jesus talked about the Kingdom of heaven more than anything else. A close second was money. I've found through the words of Jesus it's impossible to be a stingy Christian. Jesus followers are generous.

5) Going: It's no coincidence that many of Jesus' last words in each of the Gospels and even the last command He says in the book of Acts centers on the fact that we as Jesus followers must not just be His hands and feet in the community, but also His mouthpiece. It's our joy to speak to others about the Good News that this same Jesus that has died on the cross for *my* sins and forgiven what *I've* done has done the same for *everyone*.

Being, Forgiving, Serving, Giving, Going: These are the 5 targets, the 5 principles that characterize a Jesus follower. At least from the mouth of Jesus they are.

And so, I am inviting you to embark on a journey where we are not just going to read the Word of God, but we're going to put His

words into practice. And this will be the result: **By putting God's words into practice, you will find the life God has made for you!**

Here, at St. Paul, we are going to do this over time. Through sermons, and emails, and videos, I am going to introduce these 5 targets Jesus has given us. Then, next Fall, we will focus just on the first of Jesus' targets – the target of Being. The Being Challenge will be 6 weeks of sermons with small groups for Bible study and discussion and life-application. There will be daily devotions for you personally or together as a family at home. And we will grow in knowing what it means to receive, and live in God's grace. And then we will extend Christ's grace to others.

In Lent of next year, that's February and March 2024, we will do the same with Jesus' teachings on Forgiveness – the Forgiveness Challenge.

By the time we finish our anniversary year, St. Paul's 150th year of ministry in 2025, we will have grown as Christ-followers. We will have a firm foundation, like a house built on a rock, as we hear God's word and put it into practice in our lives. And by God's grace and blessing, we will be modeling Jesus. The people of our community will see Jesus alive in us. St. Paul will be "that strange group of Christians who truly love Jesus and love one another, and care for the needy, and give their time and resources so that growing numbers of people can know this loving God too.

A few years ago, the world was engrossed with the Ice Bucket Challenge. People would have a bucket of ice water dumped over their heads and give money to charities. Since then, the Brussels Sprouts Challenge has been popular. That's where you eat 25 raw Brussels Sprouts or else donate \$100 to end childhood starvation. There is a Crisco Challenge – where you work a cup of shortening into your hair so you can have a curlycue in your hair like Calvin in the comic strip "Calvin and Hobbs."

Here's a word of warning. Some of you are competitive in personality. You are tempted to take on these challenges like a mountain you got to climb, or a race you *must* win. Here's my warning: Don't! The Red Letter Challenge and the following Being

Challenge and Forgiving Challenge are NOT about how much you can accomplish or how fast. These are not about you at all, really. They are about God working in you.

We heard earlier in today's service about Peter and John going up to the Temple. There was a lame man begging. Peter didn't have any money to give him. But since Jesus had risen from the dead, Christ was alive in Peter with His living power. So, in the Name of Jesus who rose again, Peter took the lame beggar by the hand, raised him to his feet, and the man went into the Temple walking and leaping and praising God! It wasn't *Peter* who healed the man. It was Jesus Christ, our risen Savior, *in* Peter, who healed the man.

Unlike one of those popular viral challenges that you do, this challenge is NOT what you do. It's all about Christ alive in you. So will you pray? Pray for God the Holy Spirit to have Jesus' character take hold of your life, and the lives of every person of this congregation. So that Christ is alive IN us all, and shown THROUGH us all.

One more word of warning. The devil will NOT be happy about this. So pray! Pray that God protect us all from the working of the Evil One so that, in the end, Jesus Christ is glorified.

Welcome to the Red Letter Challenge! Together we will grow. You will be led to spend more time with the God who loves you. You will forgive people you never thought you would be able to. (That person may even be yourself!) You will serve and sacrifice more than you ever have before. You will become a more generous person. You will become bolder and courageous in what you say and in how you live.

I can think of no greater cause than the cause of living for Jesus. After all that He's done for you, for me, after the sins that He's overcome in our life, there is nothing that I would rather do than follow after Jesus and help others find life in Him.

We will represent the real Jesus, hitting the right targets.
Amen.