

RED LETTER CHALLENGE

BEING

Week 2

Mexico City is a world away from the East African country of Tanzania, where John Stephen Akhwari lived. But that's where he found himself in 1968. He was representing his country in the Summer Olympic Games as a marathon runner.

While running the marathon race, John Stephen Akhwari cramped up due to the high altitude in Mexico City. Mexico City is at over 7,400 feet in altitude, the air has 23 percent less oxygen than at sea level. It's brutal for marathon runners.

Akhwari started off well. He was in the leading pack of runners until someone bumped him hard, and Akhwari fell. It wasn't a gentle tumble. He fell on rough concrete, badly cutting his right leg and dislocating his knee. Medical personnel arrived quickly and bandaged his wounds. But the dislocated knee required more treatment than they could give him in the street. He needed to go to the hospital. Against their advice, Akhwari instead stood up and started off down the road behind the rest of the runners.

Given the severity of his injuries, he couldn't run his normal pace. With a combination of jogging, hobbling, and walking, he kept going. At 2 hours, 20 minutes into the race, Mamo Walde of Ethiopia crossed the finish line and won first place. The rest of the runners finished within a few minutes after that. Akhwari was nowhere close.

17 of the 74 runners didn't even finish the race that day. Akhwari was determined to not be the 18th.

The marathon was the last event of the day, and the sun had already set. Finally, Akhwari arrived and limped his way onto the track. He was clearly in great pain and his loosened bandages were dangling from his leg. By then, the crowd at the Olympic stadium had mostly gone home. Only a few thousand people were left when John Stephen Akhwari entered the stadium and made his way around the track. He crossed the finish line in last place, a full hour

and 15 minutes after the other runners had finished. The few remaining reporters rushed onto the field to ask him why he continued running in his condition. He responded simply,

My country didn't send me 5,000 miles to start this race. They sent me 5,000 miles to finish it.

The next day, it was not the photo of the man who won the gold medal on the front page of the newspaper. Despite coming in last place, it was Akhwari's picture that was in the paper, and his story was talked about all over the world.

That's an inspiring story. But, you may say to yourself, "I'm not running a marathon race." And I say to you, "Don't be so sure." The truth is, Yes, you are in a marathon race. All of us are. What is most important is not that you win first place. What is most important is that you finish, and finish well.

People are pretty good at starting things but not so good at finishing. According to Jon Acuff's book called "Finish," 92% of people don't finish the goals or resolutions they set out for themselves. 92% !

Last week we began "*The Red Letter Challenge*." If you were with us, you know that we identified a very big problem. The problem is that we, Christians, don't represent Christ well in our world. We discovered how non-Christian people describe Jesus' followers. We also identified that one of the major issues for us as Jesus' followers is we don't have clarity on what it looks like to follow Jesus. And that's when we went back to the Red letters in the Bible, you know the words that Jesus spoke, and identified 5 main targets that we are going to shoot for. How many of you remember them? Let's say them together:

Being, Forgiving, Serving, Giving, Going

So for each of the next 5 weeks we're going to talk about one of those targets. Today we are discussing BEING. This is the one that everything else hinges on. Why? Because our doing flows from our being. Jesus does not invite us into a religion, a check the box if you got it done system. He invites you into a relationship. Let me say that again. Jesus invites you into a relationship with Him.

That is far different from a religion in which you have a check list that you must do.

In the Bible, God says your life is like a marathon race. Hebrews 12:1:2 says, “... **Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith...**” We are called to run our race and we will finish our race when we keep our eyes on the Author and the finisher of our faith! Looking at Jesus is the most productive thing we can do. As we look to Him, He will lead and guide our steps.

Marathon runners need plenty of oxygen and plenty of water in order to keep on going. Oxygen and water are the fuel their bodies need to keep going and going through the hours of exhausting running.

You are in a marathon called life. Jesus is not only the One standing at your finish line, Jesus is not only the One who has gone ahead to pioneer and chart the course, Jesus is your oxygen and water. He is your fuel. You need Jesus. You need Jesus in you to run your race. You need to take Him in and let Him fill you. Jesus empowers you to keep on in faith, until you reach the finish line of heaven.

BEING is the target we are focusing on today. BEING is taking in Jesus, the fuel you need. Jesus fills you when you take time to be with Him.

Several times Jesus taught His disciples different ways to be with Him. Here are some of the different ways Jesus said you can be with Him:

- **Abide in my Word.** John 8:31
- **Pray earnestly.** Matthew 9:38
- **Worship the Lord Your God.** Luke 4:8
- **Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.** Mark 6:31 This is called Solitude. Alone by yourself, when your mind is quiet, you can remember God’s Word, get clear on His goals for you, pray more freely.

- Jesus said, “**when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face.** Matthew 6:17 Fasting is a way to deprive yourself of something so you can focus more on God’s presence in your life.

- Jesus said, **Take and eat. This is My Body.** Luke 22:19 Holy Communion is taking Jesus and His forgiveness into you physically and spiritually.

- And Jesus said **The Sabbath was made for man.** Mark 2:27 Being with Jesus when you participate in worship services is another of the different ways you can spend time with Him.

The bottom line is, Jesus wants us to be with Him. He wants us to spend time with Him.

Truly following Jesus means both 1) *knowing* Him, *being with* Him, and 2) *doing* the things He asks. Following Jesus is loving Jesus, and showing your love for Him. You show your love for Him when you do things to serve Him.

Some people are better at being than doing. They like the whole idea of spending time with God, but they never do anything.

If I told my son, “Go clean your room,” he’s not going to come back a couple hours later and say, “Hey dad, I memorized what you said. You said, ‘Thou shalt Go, clean your room.’” Isn’t that what you asked? “No, just memorizing what I said isn’t the same as doing what I asked.”

Or, if I told my son, “Go clean your room,” he’s not going to say, “Dad, I know ‘Go clean your room’ in Greek. ‘Pao Katharos sas domatio.’” I would definitely be impressed, but that’s not going to fly!

If I told my son, “Go clean your room,” he’s not going to say, “My friends and I are going to gather and study what it would look like if I went and cleaned my room.”

No, none of that’s going to work with us. So why do we think this is going to work with Jesus? Words without action were never acceptable to Jesus. Faith without action is dead. Some of us love being with Jesus but never get around to doing anything.

On the other hand, there are others who enjoy doing and never get around to BEING with Jesus. We think just BEING is boring, or not productive.

Taking time out of our busy lives to spend with Jesus requires faith and trust that most of us just don't always have the patience for.

But if we don't spend time being, our doing won't be as productive. If we don't spend time being, our doing may be done for the wrong reason. If we don't spend time resting in God and learning from Him, we'll quickly burn out and quit quickly.

Your body needs rest and nutrition to stay healthy and keep going. So does your soul. Did you know resting – taking a nap – in the middle of the day actually makes you more productive. Naps re-energize so you can get more done. Some of the most powerful people in the world have taken a nap every day. People like: Thomas Edison, Leonardo da Vinci, Winston Churchill, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Yogi Berra who is one of the most quoted sports figures of all time said "I usually take a two-hour nap from one to four."

Psalm 46:10 says, "***Be still and know that I am God.***" Many of us don't know how to be. We know how to do. But we struggle with the being.

The healthiest way to follow Christ and seek Him first is for our doing to flow out of our being. Our doing flows out of who we are and who we become when we spend time with Christ.

Here's how this plays out in life:

- When I spend my time with Christ, I can't wait to start doing what He says.
- When I come to church and worship Christ it gives me the fuel I need to keep going in life.
- When I read the Bible, God changes my goals, and my thinking, and changes my spending, and my speaking to others. Worries change into prayers. Fear changes into courage.
- When I pray, there's a peace that comes over me that I can't even explain.
- When I get away from the craziness of life by myself, then I remember all that He's done, and gratitude fills my heart.
- When I fast, I learn to lean on God more in times of struggle and remember He's my provider.

- When I take a weekly day for a Sabbath, I remember that my security is not about me and my work. I am trusting in the God who created me and in love gives me all I need.

If you truly want to follow Jesus well, it happens in your quiet time with God. I believe that your private battles will determine your public victories.

Many of us in this room would say that we want to live like Jesus, to follow Him more closely. Many of us say that Jesus is our number one priority. Do our actions show God is number one? Because if He is your number one priority, then why is it that you have a hard time carving out time for Him? If God is your first priority, why is time with Him the first thing we cut? If God is most important, shouldn't He be the last to get cut? Shouldn't TV get cut before Jesus? Shouldn't prayers be more important than posts? If God is most important, our top priority, why is that we hit the email before we hit our knee-mail? That's a little corny, but you get the point.

There are a lot of good things to do that fill your life. But none of them are good if they take the place of the One who should be on the throne of your heart and that's Jesus. Good things can become bad things when they become the god things in your heart.

People today feel tired, because they are filling their lives with things and people that ultimately cannot give them rest. But Jesus says in Matthew 11:28, ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."***

So here's what I'm asking you to do...prioritize Jesus. Okay, how do I do that? You find ways to be near Him, to learn from Him. You sit at His feet. You do the things that will get you close to Him.

Come to church regularly and make it a priority. You don't schedule your worship time around baseball, or painting the garage. Being with Jesus is more important.

Read the Bible. You intentionally schedule time in your day. Follow a reading plan or a devotion guide. You make it intentional. You intentionally be with Christ.

Get in a Bible study or a small group. You need other people to learn from. If you are going to try to be with Jesus on your own, you will get burnt out and fried by the world and want to give up and have no one to lift you up at that time.

Pray. You start with one minute if you've never prayed. Once you pray one minute, then next week try two minutes. Write down prayer requests if you need help focusing. Since we give you prayer cards each month, I add my own prayer cards so that everyday I pray for my wife, my kids, their spouses, my grand kids.

Listen to worship music. Rather than listening to whatever the top 40 hits, redeem the long commute you have to work, by playing some Christian music and focusing in on the words. Or turn on your local Christian radio station.

You take your Sabbath. You intentionally schedule a day a week not to work. I trust God will take care of things at work while I'm not there. And on that Sabbath you plan some intentional alone time with God, spend time with family, with friends. The whole day is about remembering how good your God is!

When we BE, when we rest, we find the energy, the stamina, the endurance that we need to not just start, but finish!

Do you remember the marathon runner who didn't quit but finished the race? Friends, **whatever God starts He finishes.** You may start some things and not finish. But what God starts He finishes!

Philippians 1:6: ***being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*** He will finish the work he has started.

He went all the way to the cross, not holding onto anything except the joy set before Him of saving you. Jesus gave everything until He uttered the words, *"It is finished."* It's done! Your forgiveness – done. His adopting you as His own – complete! Heaven to come – certain! His love living in you to give you a new kind of life – begin and growing stronger every day! Our God is a finisher! Jesus finished by giving everything that He had. He gave it

all so that we can give it all. Is there any worthier cause than following after Jesus?

He's a God who finishes what He starts - no matter what! They put Him on a cross, nailed Him there, and buried Him in a ground. "You are done," they said. "You are finished." And God said, "No, no, no, I'm not done yet. You don't get to tell me when I'm finished. I'll finish this on my own strength." And He rose from the dead, defeated death, sin, and the devil and now welcomes us into redeeming and restoring the world with Him. How can we resist BEING WITH a God so gracious and loving as this? AMEN.