

SERMON FOR MARCH 1, 2020
RED LETTER CHALLENGE INTRODUCTION

In the name of Jesus:

Welcome to the Red Letter Challenge. During the 40 days of Lent, you are being challenged, not to give up something for Lent, but are being challenged to take up something, namely, you are being challenged to make the most of the opportunity to read the Bible, to grow in your faith and as a child of God. This challenge is about not settling, not but stretching you in your faith so that you will grow to the glory of God.

As Christians, we are notorious for missing some of the things God has placed right in front of them. The Israelites had the message but still missed the Messiah. Peter, one of the 12 disciples, spends much time in God's presence but completely missed God's purpose. The Galatians had God's gift but somehow missed God's Grace. And I believe this extends to us today. Many times as followers of Jesus we have settle for what we have, we have good intentions but we are completely missing out on the opportunity Jesus has for us. Jesus gives us the opportunity to be His disciples, to be His workers. In Matthew 9:37, **"Jesus said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few."**

There is work to be done and Jesus invites us to be those workers. So if we are His workers, how are we doing? How are we representing Jesus? Sadly, in spite of our good intentions, we fail miserably.

If you think that I am being too harsh, just note what others say about Jesus today. When you and I think about Jesus, we think of God and His love, we think of the fruits of the Spirit: peace, joy, and kindness.

If you ask Christians what they think of other Christians, well, the responses are a mixed bag. Some say positive things, some say negative things. But the real test is what do the one's we are trying to reach think, what do they say.

5 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, too political, old-fashioned, out of touch, insensitive, and boring.

Your immediate reaction—like mine—is that this characterization is grossly unfair. Why don't these folks recognize all the good things Christians do? Why don't they notice how the Church leads the way in helping people in need, through food pantries, homeless shelters, hospitals, and in disaster relief when tornados, floods or hurricanes hit?

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. We have missed the mark. And again, sadly, perception is reality for a great many people.

Hence the Red Letter Challenge. It began as a desire to represent the real Jesus to people, so that others might know who Jesus really is, because if they know who Jesus really is, then the hope is that people will fall in love with Jesus, believe in Jesus, and follow Jesus. So we need to change the picture we are telling of Jesus.

The change that needs to take place is with each of us. Jesus doesn't need to change; we need to change, which is the message of Lent. Repent. Change. Turn from doing what which misses the mark, turn from your good intentions to Jesus. Jesus forgives you. Jesus changes you. He calls you to be His disciples. That means that to believe in Jesus you are called to follow Jesus. Actively. Not content with being

a spectator, but one who actually is moved by the love of Christ to live for Christ.

That is our goal that is what we are shooting for, to live for Jesus. 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.

In the rifle competition, he was leading going into the final shot. He was assured the gold medal. All he had to do what hit the target he was shooting at. But this great shooter----missed. He hit the target all right, but it was the wrong target. He missed the mark. The lesson is simple, you can have the best intentions in the world but if you are shooting at the wrong target, or focused on the wrong thing, you will never hit the target you are supposed to hit.

God loves you with an everlasting love. That is why He sent Jesus. All throughout His life Jesus kept hitting the target; to be holy as His Father is holy, loving God first above all things and loving others as God loves. Jesus came to do the will of the Father, to keep focusing on

saving the world by living the perfect life and dying the perfect death for sinners such as you and me you daily and with regularity sin and miss the mark.

So God calls you in Baptism to be His child. In Baptism He washes away your sins. In Baptism you have been made God's child, your sins are forgiven, and the Holy Spirit lives in and through you, so that we can say as the Apostle Paul writes: "For me to live is Christ." We are called Christians, followers of Jesus, little Christs, if you will, to live as Jesus lived, loving God first about all things, and showing love to our neighbor.

And that is the challenge isn't it? Because we are tempted by Satan, the world we live in, and our own sinful flesh to live for ourselves, to make certain that we get ours, to look out for the self, because if we don't, we falsely believe that no one else will. But God has a different plan, a different way of life for all of us.

So, in this Red Letter Challenge we will challenge you to read and study and meditate on the words of Jesus, God's Word, for God's Word is living and active. God works through His Word. Things happen to sinners when they read the Word: they come to faith in Jesus and their lives are changed.

Just listen to what Jesus says: ***“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

To follow Jesus and live for Him means that you have a solid foundation in your life, and that foundation comes from the Word of God. Jesus says: **"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."** We are called to not only read the **Word of God and believe the Word of God, but also to put into practice the faith we believe.**

When we do this, we represent Jesus. And this is not a burden, it is actually the greatest opportunity we have, for as Luther writes: you were purchased and won from sin, Satan, and death, not with silver or

gold, but with the precious blood of Jesus, that you might be His own, live under Him in His Kingdom, and serve Him forever.

So won't you take up the challenge? There is still time. Books are on the table in the hallway. There is a small group session this Tuesday that Jim Snyder will lead so that you can discuss and process what we will learn. These are the five targets: Being, Forgiving, Serving, Giving, Going: These are the 5 targets, the 5 principles that characterize a Jesus follower. You will learn and grow in the Word as you follow Jesus.

So let's have some fun and get into God's Word. Let's let God have His way with us and change us. In doing so, 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. And you will do what you want do to as a Christian, that is, you will live for Jesus; in thanks for all that He has done for you. You will go out with good intentions, and hit the right targets. To the glory of God and in Jesus' name. Amen