

Red Letter Challenge 2016

RedLetterChallenge.com

RLC

Follow me.
4 Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.
5 Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.
6 Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
7 Blessed are ye that hunger and thirst for righteousness: for ye shall be satisfied.
8 Blessed are ye that are persecuted for my name: for ye shall receive a hundred fold more now, and in the life to come, and shall inherit life.
9 Blessed are ye that shall be persecuted and shall be despised, and shall be reviled, and shall be persecuted for my name's sake: for ye shall receive a hundred fold more now, and in the life to come, and shall inherit life.
10 Blessed are they which are persecuted of men: for the Son of man shall be persecuted of them.

Red Letter Challenge

Follow me.

1

“If you love me, you will obey my commands”

John 14:5

“Because I said so!” How many of us remember those words from our parents? It’s one of those statements that you hate to hear when you are a kid! On the flip side, as a parent, you love this phrase because there is no great comeback for it! This phrase, between my wife and I comes up quite a bit these days in our house, because, you see, we have a five-year old. And one thing that five-year olds do is ask a *ton* of questions. And sometimes, if you actually indulge the question trail you will get to some point where you will not know the answer and, thus, be forced to say, “Because I said so.”

The reason I bring this up today is because I want to talk about the motivation behind why we are embarking on this journey together. It’s not because God says, “Do this” and “Do that” that I enter into a challenge like this. A relationship with God is not about checking off a box that says “I did this,” and “I did that” and “Look at how great I am.” It’s about receiving God’s love and grace and being so compelled by that love and grace, that we can’t help but want to do what God is asking us to do!

Has anyone ever done something so great for you, that you can’t help but want to repay them?

We don’t grit our teeth together and stomp our feet and say, “Fine, I’ll do what God wants me to do.” No, we do what God wants us to do because we love Him and we believe that His words and following after Him will lead us to eternal life! The more we do what He is asking us to do, the more we find the life we were made for and the abundant life that God designed us to have. This challenge stems from the very fact that God loved me first and I am so overwhelmed by his love that I want to do something about it! And what do I want to do: whatever God wants me to do.

Our actions flow from our heart.

Your actions do matter. That’s why James, the brother of Jesus, said, “Faith without works is useless.”¹

That’s why it’s a worthy investment to do what God says together. It’s one thing to say “I love you,” but another thing to back it up by showing it.

A lawyer actually asked Jesus in Matthew 22:36-39: “What is the greatest commandment to follow?”³⁷ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Ultimately we follow Jesus and His commandments because we love God and we want others to receive that love too! By loving one another, others can actually see God in and through us. Jesus said in John 13:35: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

All of the commandments and everything that we will do in this challenge comes back to love, and the idea that through our love, others can be led to believe in Jesus. We don't do this challenge because Jesus tells us we have to. We do this challenge because God wants us to. He asks us to. And sometimes we don't understand why God asks us certain things, but we do them anyway because it's God asking!

I heard Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, preach many years ago on something called “BYSSIW.” It stands for, “Because you say so, I will.” This is the phrase that the disciple Peter echoed when Jesus asked him to cast out his nets into the deep water even though they'd already been fishing for hours with no luck. I'm sure Peter didn't really want to do this. But because the request came from Jesus, a man that Peter trusted, Peter was led to say, “Because you say so, I will.”

And that's the key. All of these things, these challenges, these words come directly out of the Bible. They are God's words to us today. And because they are God's words and because we love Him, may we adopt a “BYSSIW” attitude for all of the challenges. Even when it is hard. Even when we do not understand why. Even when it is uncomfortable. BYSSIW!

Bible for the Day: Luke 5:1-11: See for yourself the story behind the “BYSSIW” response of Peter. What would you have done if you were Peter? Peter was an expert fisherman, and here comes this stranger, Jesus, who doesn't know much about fishing (at least in your opinion). How would you respond? May we all respond with a BYSSIW attitude like Peter because we know that our God will never lead us astray and will only lead us to eternal life with Him!

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. ² He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. ³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”

⁵ Simon answered, “Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

⁶ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" ⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, ¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." ¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Challenge for the Day: Pray for a "BYSSIW" attitude for this challenge! Leave sticky notes all over the house with the acronym "BYSSIW" to get you ready for the challenge! How did your experience go today? Have you ever done something even when you didn't understand just because somebody asked you to? Post online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

2

“Pray earnestly”

Matthew 9:38

Okay, let’s just admit it: prayer can be weird! You’ve seen it. I’ve seen it. If you want a room of middle or high-school students to be quiet, what do you do? Ask someone to pray. It’s amazing how they will all be quiet and look at the floor! There’s another weird side of prayer as well. And many of you probably know what I’m talking about: The guy that when he starts praying enters into another state of intelligence by offering large, verbose, superfluous words that you’ve never even heard out of his mouth before. Like this one:

“Dear omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God, we beseech thee to justify us through thy vicarious atonement, and sanctify your ekklesia through thy Holy Spirit. Though we inhabit a “simul et iustis peccator” world, we are forever grateful that we receive nourishment and are sustained through the Eucharist. Help us properly exegete the Bible and this world until the coming parousia. Most sovereign, infallible, immutable God, Amen.”

Translation: “Hey awesome God, thanks for your grace and continue to guide us with your Holy Spirit until you return! Most awesome God, Amen.”

Will Davis, author of *Pray Big*, says “Somehow we’ve gotten the impression that true prayer requires big words, lengthy phrases, and choice theological terms.”² Everything that is said seems to be “just right” and even rhymes. To some degree you are impressed by this, but another part of you is actually turned off. I’m not saying those prayers aren’t genuine, but sometimes they can do more harm than good. I think this sort of prayer can actually give a bad impression of what prayer is.

You see, at the heart of it all, we have a God that desires to have a relationship with us. Prayer is about being in relationship with God. And God wants you to be who you are. It’s not about coming to God with all the right words. It’s not about saying everything perfectly. It’s about talking, listening, and spending time with Him. And when we spend time with Him, He wants us to be who we are! He doesn’t want a fake version of who we think the world wants us to be. He wants you, with all your imperfections, to simply spend time with Him, and to grow closer to Him. He wants you to tell Him what’s on your mind.

We all come to prayer differently: some of us with good motives, some with bad motives, and some with mixed motives, and that’s okay. Prayer isn’t faking like everything is perfect before God. It’s not telling God things that aren’t true. It’s simply being real before Him: telling Him how it is. I’m not saying we shouldn’t be respectful, but I’m also saying we shouldn’t be afraid to address Him. In fact, in the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches us to address God as a Father. And so, in many ways, prayer is like me listening and

talking with my Dad. Richard Foster says, “Our children come to us with the craziest requests at times! Often we are grieved by the meanness and selfishness in their requests, but we would be all the more grieved if they never came to us even with their meanness and selfishness. We are simply glad that they do come-mixed motives and all.”³

Jesus tells us in Matthew 9:38 to pray earnestly. Prayer is such an important part of our journey on this challenge. Some of the things will be easy; some will be difficult. I’m grateful that no matter how easy or hard the challenge will be, God is always ready to listen. Prayer is one of the most powerful tools we have on this earth, yet for so many of us it is not a part of our regular daily routine.

It’s okay if you don’t know exactly how to pray or what to pray. Even Jesus’ disciples had to ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. Prayer is communication with God. Just as you have many relationships in this world, God desires a relationship with us.

God is glad when you come to Him in prayer. Praying earnestly is our challenge we are taking up today but this is truly meant to be a part of our lives every day. We learn from the Parable of the Persistent Widow (found in Luke 18:1-8) to never give up praying. Continue to ask boldly and specifically from God the things that you desire. The more you come to know Him and spend time in prayer, the more you find yourself praying for things that not only you desire, but that He also desires!

Bible for the Day: Luke 18:1-8: Parable of the Persistent Widow. In this parable, notice how God asks us to pray and never give up!

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

⁴ “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’”

⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

Challenge for the Day

Several challenges in the Red Letter Challenge will be to come together for a joint community event. This is one of those days! Check out these events at each of the

participating churches and if you are unable to make the community prayer events, find your challenge below:

theCross Mount Dora Night of Prayer

Holy Cross Prayer Event

Ascension Lutheran Prayer Event

Spend some time today in prayer. If you haven't prayed before or haven't for a while, here's a great model for how to pray:

- A: Adoration (Tell God what you love about Him)
- C: Confession (Tell God about the sins in your life and about how you aim to turn/repent from those)
- T: Thanksgiving (Thank him for his forgiveness and for all the blessings in your life)
- S: Supplication (Ask him specific things that you need in your life)

In your prayer time, ask for God to give you the strength to make it through this challenge. Boldly ask Him to strengthen your faith and that through your witness others might come to know Him. This is one of the challenges that in some way, shape, or form ought to take place everyday throughout the challenge! Go online to www.redletterchallenge.com and share your thoughts on today's challenge and what you were praying for!

3

“Abide in my Word”

John 8:31

What if I were to tell you that God could speak to you at any moment? Sometimes people say, “I just keep waiting to hear God’s voice, and I’m getting nothing.” If there was a way to listen to God and hear from Him right now, would you do it? Of course you would! The Bible is the book that contains God’s words! It has life in it. The Holy Spirit speaks through it. God reveals himself to you in it! So why do the people that claim to love God so much often steer clear from reading the Bible, and in effect, miss out on opportunities to hear from God?

LifeWay Research surveyed more than 2,900 Protestant churchgoers just a few months ago and found that while 90 percent “desire to please and honor Jesus in all I do,” only 19 percent personally read the Bible every day.⁴ 19 percent. That’s pathetic.

Maybe you are a part of the 19 percent that reads the Bible, and if you are, keep going to His Word as often as you can! But 81 percent of you are going through this challenge and don’t regularly read the Bible.

Listen, I’m not perfect. There are days that I fail. My job as a pastor certainly helps keep me in line and keep me in His Word. I’m not speaking from a pedestal here, just from a position that God has given me for some strange reason. He’s called me to be the pastor and a speaker for the church and it’s my job to call us out when and where we fail so that we can grow together in becoming who Christ wants us to be.

The full quote from Jesus is found in John 8:31-32: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” The word “abide” can mean to dwell, or reside. Jesus essentially tells us to live in His word. In other words, He wants us to make the Bible, His words, a part of our life. We are to read, mark, and inwardly digest them. They are to become such a part of us that we can’t imagine what our lives were like before we knew the Bible. Later in this challenge we are going to read how we are called to have His words on our doorposts and that they are to be a part of our life when we wake up, when we walk, when we sit down, and when we lay down! There’s this idea that the Word of God is supposed to go with us wherever we go!

In fact, in the Old Testament, Jesus actually told Ezekiel to eat the words of God. Ezekiel 3:3 says, “‘Feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.’ Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey.” God wanted these words to be consumed by Ezekiel so that these words would literally take life inside of him. The same is true of us today. God wants us to be reading and studying the Bible so that the Bible

becomes a part of us. His words have the power to actually change us and move us. That's what this whole 40-day challenge is all about: bringing Jesus' words to life today!

The Bible is the one true story of life. The Bible reveals the one true God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It's in the words of the Holy Bible that we experience and see that through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection we are offered grace, forgiveness, freedom, and a new life! Because of this new life, we can't help but want to make a difference and point people to know more about our amazing God. And often times, where do we point them to find out more about our God? To the Bible!

Bible for the Day: Ezekiel:2:7-3:4: Here you see God calling Ezekiel to be a prophet and speak difficult, but true words to the nation of Israel. God is giving the words to Ezekiel to proclaim to the Israelites. Now we have His words to say contained for us in the Bible, and like Ezekiel, we are called to share those words and the Gospel message with the rest of the world.

⁷ You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. ⁸ But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious people; open your mouth and eat what I give you."

⁹ Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, ¹⁰ which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe.

³ And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel." ² So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.

³ Then he said to me, "Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it." So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.

⁴ He then said to me: "Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them.

Challenge for the Day: Spend 30 minutes reading a section of the Bible today. If you haven't ever read the Bible, a good place to start is the Gospel of John. John is the 4th book of the New Testament and tells the story of Jesus in a way that helps people understand who Jesus is. Of course, some people like to start at the beginning in Genesis as well. This challenge today, is a great habit to practice every day for the rest of the challenge and thereafter. Post about what you read online and what you learned or any questions you might have online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

4

“For I was hungry and you gave me food”

Matthew 25:35

We hear a lot about food in our country. We hear a lot about obesity and how much Americans eat. In fact, in 2011, Americans literally averaged to eat a ton of food per person (1996 pounds to be exact). Included in that is over 630 pounds of dairy, 185 in meat, 197 in grains, fruits and veggies total almost 700, and sweets and fats is over 200 pounds! Most of us don't have to worry about eating; we simply have to ask, “what are we going to eat today?” As much as we hear about obesity and how much we eat though, there are still millions of people in our country that are without food or in need.⁵

Americans, however, discard 40 percent of the food supply every year, and the average American family of four ends up throwing away an equivalent of up to \$2,275 annually in food. Just a 15 percent reduction in losses in the U.S. food supply would save enough to feed 25 million Americans annually.⁶

I can't place blame on everyone else on this one. My family suffers from this too and we've started to do something about it. You see, we have two young boys and we noticed about half or more of the food we give them on their plate they wouldn't eat. It would get thrown in the garbage. Feeling bad about this, my wife and I started to take less realizing we would get full just by eating their leftovers, and in return, throw less food away!

Jesus was talking to a large group of people when he drops this bomb on them:

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”⁷

We learned yesterday that one of the ways people will see God in us is when we actually do what He said to do. Here Jesus says that whatever we do for the least of those in the world, in other words, the least privileged, we've done it for Him. He says that the people who take care of the least privileged will be the ones who are welcomed into His kingdom. This isn't a scare tactic that Jesus is using. He's not saying, “If you don't do

this, then you'll burn in Hell." He's simply saying, "The people that believe in me and look to me as their God are the people who help the least privileged." That's just what they do! The stronger a person's relationship with God, the more natural it becomes to take care of God's children in this world.

Serving on a board of directors for a food pantry here in Mount Dora, FL is a constant reminder that there are a countless number of people who are hungry. Even in America, the land of blessing and opportunity, and in a place where according to historical standards, we are incredibly wealthy, people are still starving. They need help! Who better to help them than the followers of Jesus?

If your cupboards are full, if you don't have to worry about what you will eat or drink tomorrow because you know you will have plenty, then you can help us in this cause.

Bible for the Day: Matthew 14:13-21: In the story of God feeding the five thousand, we see that God provides for the people who are hungry. As witnesses of Him, we are called to do the same. From this story, we learn that God can turn a little bit into a lot! Which means that anything you can give can help!

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

¹⁶ Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

¹⁷ "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

¹⁸ "Bring them here to me," he said. ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Challenge for the Day: Give food to the needy. Whether it's giving it to someone on the side of the street or donating to your local food pantry, be generous. Clear out your cupboards and pantry and/or go shopping and collect food for the needy. You can either donate on your own or bring it to your local church to give to a food pantry.

Speaking of that, if your local church doesn't have a food pantry box that people can bring in food on a regular basis, smack your pastor upside the head and tell him you are

going to bring one in! That's right, you bring one in. Don't tell him a good idea and then make him do it. Pastors have enough going on. You bring it in! Sorry for the rant 😊

Post about your experience today at www.redletterchallenge.com.

5

“I was naked and you gave me clothing”

Matthew 25:35

“There once was a rich man who was near death. He was very grieved because he had worked so hard for his money and wanted to be able to take it with him to heaven. So he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him.

An angel heard his plea and appeared to him. “Sorry, but you can’t take your wealth with you.”

The man begged the angel to speak to God to see if He might bend the rules. The man continued to pray that his wealth could follow him. The angel reappeared and informed the man that God had decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him.

Overjoyed, the man gathered his largest suitcase and filled it with pure gold bars and placed it beside his bed. Soon afterward, he died and showed up at the gates of heaven to greet St. Peter.

St. Peter, seeing the suitcase, said, “Hold on, you can’t bring that in here!”

The man explained to St. Peter that he had permission and asked him to verify his story with the Lord. Sure enough, St. Peter checked it out, came back and said, “You’re right. You are allowed one carry-on bag, but I’m supposed to check its contents before letting it through.”

St. Peter opened the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind and exclaimed, ‘You brought pavement?’”⁸

Revelation 21:21, speaking of heaven, says, “The twelve gates were made of pearls—each gate from a single pearl! And the main street was pure gold, as clear as glass.” Can you imagine streets made of gold? I can’t wait!

I’ve told this joke once or twice before when it comes to thinking about how to spend our money here in this world and what it all matters in the end. Jesus talks in the Sermon on the Mount about making sure we don’t store up treasures in earth (and included in his dialogue was clothing), but instead storing up treasures on heaven.

I can’t imagine a life having to worry about clothes. I feel guilty sometimes seeing all that I have knowing others don’t have as much. A couple of years ago, I posted something on Facebook about how many pairs of shoes my wife had. Out of everything I posted all year, I believe, this drummed up the most comments from all my family and friends! I asked the question, “Should she give some away or is it okay for a woman to have this many pairs of shoes?” The responses were all over the map. She did end up giving away a lot of

her pairs of shoes to charity and I was really proud of her for that. But now I'm wondering that about myself?

Do I have too much? Do I really need all that I have? Or can someone else benefit from stuff that's just sitting around in my closets and dressers. What about you? How much is too much?

God says that when we do something for the "least of these" in our world, or the least privileged, it's like we do it for Him. Imagine Jesus on the side of the road with no clothes. If you knew it was Jesus what would you do? Of course you would clothe Him. You would give Him whatever he needed! If your dressers are full and you don't have to worry about whether or not you'll have clothes tomorrow, you can be a big part in completing today's challenge!

Bible for the Day: Matthew 6:19-34: Listen to Jesus' words about what it means to store up treasures in heaven as opposed to earthly things like clothes.

¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

²⁴ "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Challenge for the Day: Go through your dressers and closets and give all the clothes you don't need to a thrift shop near you. An even greater challenge: Don't buy clothing for yourself for 6 months and use the money that you would have spent on clothes and instead give it to a local charity or your home church. How did today go? Was it hard to give your clothes away? Let us know at www.redletterchallenge.com.

6

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”

Matthew 5:44

Maybe you've seen the phrase, “Do not hate your enemies, but pray for your enemies because it's super passive aggressive and will totally tick them off.” While funny, that's not the intent of why we pray or love our enemies. We don't do it to make them feel worse. We do it because we want to live like Jesus. Jesus calls us to a radically different lifestyle. A life in which we will look weird to the rest of the world. It's weird to say I'm going to love my enemies and pray for them; it's even weirder to actually do it! When we live like that, our life doesn't look compatible to everyone else. Most of the world is taught to hate their enemies or seek revenge on them. Jesus is calling us to the opposite of that.

During seminary in St. Louis, I was blessed to be able to lead a college ministry at the nearby college, Saint Louis University. We had worship services on Saturday evening and there was one service that I really remember. I preached a sermon and after I preached it, I felt really, really good about it. It was a night where we had a packed house, the energy was high, and I was passionate about what I was preaching about. It was also a night that featured about five different seminary professors in attendance as well. It wasn't unusual to have a professor or two in attendance, but this was a few more than normal. And there was a moment of pride in me, because I knew that I had just preached one of the best sermons that I had ever preached, and there were a lot of professors in the crowd that got to hear me at my best. Or so I thought!

I remember hearing comment after comment about how powerful the sermon was, how much the person needed to hear just what I had said, and how inspirational it was. Being a seminary student, it was nice to be affirmed like that.

Two weeks later I got called into my supervisor's office, and one of the professors that was in attendance that night wanted to talk to me about my sermon. I thought, “Great, he must have really liked it and maybe he wants me to preach it somewhere else.”

Nope! Couldn't have been further from the truth. He hated it. While we talked, he criticized my theology, claimed there was no Gospel in it, and called my “performance” narcissistic. He didn't think I was fit to be a Lutheran pastor and required me to take an additional Law and Gospel class at the seminary.

After our conversation, I figured everything would just go away. But it didn't. I learned that he was still really upset about my sermon and wanted to make an example out of me. My other professors just told me to cooperate and not make a big deal out of it.

Thankfully I had many other professors that supported me and so nothing more ever happened.

But I held a grudge against this professor for a long time. I didn't understand why he was trying to go behind-the-scenes and make an example out of me. Even if it was a bad sermon (which I still don't believe it was by the way), why try to make my life and my Seminary experience so miserable. I didn't understand why, and to be honest, I still don't.

This is the guy that Jesus wants me to pray for?

You may have enemies in your life. Some of them may be much more serious than what I just described. And it's a good question to ask, "Why does Jesus want me to pray for my enemies?"

In Christ, we are not a people of vengeance and bitterness, we are a people of forgiveness. When you hold grudges or seek revenge, you are not acting like Christ. I'm not saying it's easy, or that it's not okay to wrestle with things, but ultimately God wants us to have a heart of forgiveness. And if you can pray for your enemies, you are on the right path.

Time and time again Jesus prayed for his enemies. He even offered a prayer at His crucifixion. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."⁹ In the midst of death and betrayal, it was amazing that Jesus could still pray for His enemies. And if you don't think it's possible for us to do the same, take a look at the apostle Stephen. His story is found in Acts, chapters 6 and 7. After testifying of Jesus' love and grace for the world, the crowd stones Stephen to death. And right before dying, he falls on his knees, and says this prayer, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."¹⁰

I know it's hard to pray for your enemies. You will need the strength and power that comes from the Holy Spirit to be able to do it. If you are having a hard time with this, invite the Holy Spirit into your heart today!

Bible for the Day: Luke 23:32-46 and Acts 7:54-60: Notice in these two passages how both Jesus and Stephen had the power to pray for their enemies even in the midst of dying.

Luke 23:32-46: ³² *Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.*

³⁵ *The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."*

³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews.

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

⁴³ Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Acts 7:54-60: ⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Challenge for the Day: Pray for those who have hurt you, abused you, or become your enemies. This isn’t easy to do for many of us. And if you are willing, actually do a good deed for someone you would consider an enemy. How was today’s challenge? Hard? Easier than you thought? Couldn’t do it? Share your thoughts online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

7

“And when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face”

Matthew 6:17

One pastor said, “It is now my regular practice to fast before and during times I preach. I have a deeper sense of dependency and of the immense power of the spoken word. This has been demonstrated by the dear individual in my congregation who runs our tape ministry. She said that since January of this year, her order for sermon tapes has doubled. ‘I can’t explain it,’ she said, ‘but whatever it is, keep it up!’”¹¹

I’ll have to check with the lady running my “tape ministry” to see if fasting might make any difference for me!

To fast means to abstain from something.

One time a friend of mine fasted from the mega-tub of popcorn at the movie theatres for the 40 days of Lent (the 40 days before Easter). This is not really the fast we are talking about here. As much as he tried telling me it was a sacrifice, it wasn’t! Also, guys, while it’s tempting to fast from doing laundry, house chores, etc., that’s not what we’re talking about here either!

To truly fast you ought to abstain from something important in your life. Something that you can’t go without. Something that you will want or crave at some point. Because it’s in that moment or moments of craving or wanting that you can go to God with your feelings and thoughts. It’s those times that you can thank Him that He does provide for your needs.

Jesus also tells us that when we fast, we don’t do it to get recognized by others. You don’t fast to make others say, “Wow, that person is so spiritual,” or, “Did you see Bob is giving up food for a week? He must have such a good relationship with God.” That’s not why we do it. And that’s what Jesus warns us against. Fasting is something you do for your own relationship with God. It is an exercise, a discipline, which brings you closer to God and helps you realize just how much God does provide for you. That’s why he tells us to wash our face. The Pharisees would fast and would make their faces look disfigured and gloomy so when someone noticed something was wrong, they would be able to talk about how they were fasting. They fasted in order to receive the attention, praise, and glory from man. That’s not what Jesus wanted when He calls us to fast. He wants us to give up something important and remember that He provides.

It’s so easy to get caught up in this world with all of its distractions. There are so many days when I get to the end I realize, “Wow, I didn’t spend any time with God today in Word or in prayer!” I’m sure that I’m not the only one that has happened to. And when I

look back at my day, it all seemed important at the time, but if I'm honest I know that no matter how busy I am, there are still moments of the day that I waste. Or moments where I could have included God. Or things that I could have done differently to free up time to grow in my relationship with God.

Fasting is a great way to remember God all throughout the day. If you fast from food, for example, you will get hungry, and you will remember why you are not eating that particular day. In that moment, you can go to the Lord and thank Him that he provides food daily for you.

Ultimately what God wants is our hearts. When we fast, we are giving Him our hearts. We are telling him, "You are what's most important in my life...all of this other stuff, even though it's important, pales in comparison to you. I find everything that I need in this world in you."

Many people fast before making difficult decisions. This is a very godly practice. Before Jesus picked his disciples, perhaps the biggest earthly decision He had to make, He fasted for 40 days in the wilderness. If you've been unsure of a decision or have been waffling back and forth between something that's in front of you, fasting is a good way to clear your mind from worldly things and perhaps receive clarity from God with what He is calling you to do.

Some might choose to fast from food. For others, you will think of something else important to you. Some of you may decide to fast for more than a day. Here are a few other examples of things people have fasted from: television, video games, cell phone, Facebook, etc.

Bible for the Day: Matthew 6:16-18: These are the verses that mention the kind of fasting that the Pharisees were doing versus the kind of fasting that God is interested in!

¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Challenge for the Day: Give up something today. Make sure you pick something that you usually need or do in a day though. If it's something like video games or television, your fast could go for much more than one day. Basically pick something that's important to you...give it up...and pray to God in the difficult times or times in which you want that something that you are giving up. How did your fast go? What did you fast from? Give ideas at the website for today's challenge at www.redletterchallenge.com.



“As you enter the house, greet it”

Matthew 10:12

Jesus articulated these words when he sent out his twelve disciples to spread the Good News. He was telling them to go to the “lost sheep of Israel.” The lost sheep of Israel were those people who hadn’t yet heard the Good News that Jesus was bringing His kingdom and that they could not only be welcomed into that kingdom but could also be a part of bringing that kingdom into this world! He was sending them out with no money, no bag, no extra clothes, just the Good News.

It’s quite a risk to take nothing and expect God to show up time and time again. I love that about the disciples. As much as they had fear and doubt when Jesus was with them, you have to give them some credit. I mean, Jesus was calling them to do some things that were really scary. “Wait, what God? You want me to take nothing, go to a strange land, and start preaching or talking about you, then find a stranger, ask them if I can stay, and I’m supposed to just trust that you’ll work it out? Is that what you are asking?” We do live in different circumstances and in a different culture but I know Jesus is still asking us to go out and seek the lost and even to put ourselves intentionally in situations where we learn to rely and trust in God showing up!

In fact, that’s the goal of the church I believe. The church exists to bring glory to God and nothing brings more glory to God than when someone who is lost becomes found -- when someone who doesn’t believe in Jesus comes into a relationship with Him. Luke 15:7 says, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

So if the goal is to find the lost, that means we need to do what? Go looking! The church and God’s kingdom will not grow the way we or God wants it to if we simply stay inside the walls of our homes and our churches. God is calling us to go out and meet new people. To make new relationships. From the beginning of our church, this is what I have been preaching and teaching. In order for God’s church to grow in a healthy way, that can only happen when the lost are being found, and the only way the lost will be found is by going to find them! By going to their turf. By being a part of the community.

Meeting new people may not be comfortable for some of us. That’s why God said He would send the Holy Spirit to go with us! The Holy Spirit, is known by many as “The Comforter.” So when you are feeling uncomfortable, remember, you’ve got the Comforter with you!

God is calling us to meet new people and to be a presence in the community. Sometimes just going and saying “Hi” can make all the difference. Do you have a neighbor that just

moved in down the street? Have you stopped and said “Hi” and welcomed them into the neighborhood. If not, why not? What has happened to our friendliness?

I remember when I moved somewhere and someone came and introduced themselves to our family. In fact, those are often the people that we remain closest to. It truly does make a difference.

Bible for the Day: Matthew 10:5-14: Here are the marching orders that Jesus gave to his disciples. Pretty scary, huh?

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

⁹ “Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts— ¹⁰ no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. ¹¹ Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. ¹² As you enter the home, give it your greeting. ¹³ If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴ If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet.

Challenge for the Day: Say hello to some neighbors that you haven’t met yet or invite them over for dinner. Another option is to start/join a group in your neighborhood or community around doing something you enjoy. Get in a new social circle! Meet new people. Was today easy for you? Hard? Did you want to do it? Not do it? Share online at www.redletterchallenge.com about your experience and any ideas that may be helpful for others.



“Give to everyone who begs from you”

Luke 6:30

We’ve all seen them around: Beggars on the side of the street holding up signs that say, “I’m hungry...will work for food...lost job...need help...God bless you.” When you see someone holding that sign, what goes through your mind? Be honest. Sometimes it’s hard to trust them. All sorts of things go through my mind: “Can I trust this person? Are they even looking for a job or do they just want a handout? What are they really going to do with the money I give?”

After this stuff goes on in my head, I usually feel guilty. I’m not naïve enough to think that everyone who begs, begs for the right reasons. But at the same time, who am I to judge someone I don’t know? Matthew 7:1 tells us not to judge, unless we too want to be judged. It’s not my job to judge someone I don’t know. It’s my job to love people like Christ and it’s my job to receive them for who they are. It’s my job to help the people that God puts in my path. I firmly believe that God puts people in your path and gives you opportunities every day to practice being a follower of Christ.

I’m betting that many of us who are reading this book aren’t broke, lost, or in need of any major help. Sometimes the toughest decision I have to make in the day is not if I’m going to eat today, but what am I going to eat today?

And if there is a person who is truly lost, broke, and in need of help and I’m not in any of those situations, then what a horrible witness I am being if I am withholding help from them! If you know someone is truly hurting right now, give to them whatever they need. Giving doesn’t have to mean money. You can give your time, a listening ear, your expertise, other material goods, etc. Be creative, but most of all God is asking us to be generous. And as you go along in this challenge, just notice how often this theme of generosity comes up!

Bible for the Day: Acts 3: Sometimes giving means money. But sometimes not. If you are a believer in Christ, there’s always something you can give! Check out this story about the disciples Peter and John and how they gave what they had:

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. ² Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. ⁴ Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” ⁵ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

⁶ Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” ⁷ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. ⁸ He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. ⁹ When all the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Challenge for the Day: Obviously the thing that jumps out is if you see a beggar on the side of the street give to them. Pray that God would put someone in your path who is asking something of you today and then respond to that request. If you see a beggar on the street try giving them more than money...give them a Bible, with your business card, or your church invite card, and a few bucks. Take it even further, perhaps, and invite them to lunch with you. Let them know you will be praying for them. Or you could go next level like several at my church have and they have made "care backpacks" and stuffed them with deodorant, socks, toothbrush, granola bars, bottled water, etc. and have them ready to have out the next time you see someone who is in need.

Comment how your experience went today online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

10

“The Sabbath was made for man”

Mark 2:27

The Sabbath! This is a topic that is one of the most misunderstood amongst followers of Jesus today. Some practice the Sabbath on Saturday, some on Sunday, and some not at all. So what is the Sabbath and what does it mean for us today? Some followers of Jesus will go into an interview and say, “Ya, I can work whatever days you want whenever.” Other followers of Jesus will walk into that same interview and say, “No, Sunday’s are a deal-breaker. I can’t work on that day.” Why do some say “Yes” to work on Sunday and others say “No” to work on Sunday. Why does a business like Chick-Fil-a forfeit the opportunity to make 42.5 million dollars a year by closing on Sundays while almost every other business, even Christian businesses, stay open? What is the deal with the Sabbath and what does it mean for us today? Big questions so let’s dive right in:

Sabbath is from the Hebrew word which means “rest.” It was first used in Genesis 2 after God created the world. God created the world in 6 days, and then he took a Sabbath on the 7th day. He rested. Why did God rest? Was he tired? Did making the blowhole on the whale exhaust Him? No, He rested because what He made was worth enjoying. We are made like our Creator, and so we create and rest. Work and play. Go and stop. Think about this. If God is so enamored with His creation that even He has to take a step back and a day to enjoy it, then shouldn’t we?

Have you ever mowed your lawn? And after mowing your lawn, even though it may not have been fun or enjoyable while you were doing it, you still feel really good about what you’ve done. After it’s all done, you take your shower, grab a drink, and then lean on the window-sill and just look out your window so proud of your work. You call your wife over and you say, “Honey, check out how tight those edges are, and how straight those lines are.” I believe this is like the Sabbath. You are resting and enjoying something you created. Maybe it’s not a lawn, but a piece of art. You hang it up and admire it and just look at it. Maybe it’s in preparing food. You’ve made an amazing meal and are ready to dig into it, but first you take a picture of it to recognize how great it is. This is what it means to enjoy your creation and this is why God made the Sabbath. We were made to work, but also to rest.

God tells us that the Sabbath was made for us. In fact, this wasn’t the first time he has told us this. God instituted the Sabbath as a gift for the Israelite people in the Old Testament.¹² In fact, the Sabbath wasn’t just one of the Ten Commandments that God gave to the people, but you get this sense that following this one commandment was the way in which people proved they were in relationship, or covenant with God. God says, “Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout

your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you.”¹³ For whatever reason, this was the one commandment or the one way in which to prove if someone was in relationship with Him or not. It was a big deal! People that broke the Sabbath or profaned it in any way were actually called to be put to death. Talk about harsh! But remember, the Sabbath was always meant as a gift: to rest and enjoy the creation that God has given to us. But people didn't understand it and rather than a gift it was perceived as more of a burden.

By the time that Jesus came, the Pharisees, this prominent group of Jewish people, had changed the Sabbath into something it was never meant to be. In their desire to protect and to uphold the law, they built a hedge around the keeping of the Sabbath. They had written up chapter upon chapter concerning what it meant to keep the Sabbath. These were some of the rules that they came up with regarding the Sabbath:

- They taught that you should not look in a mirror on the Sabbath because you might be tempted to pluck out a grey hair and that would be reaping.
- They said that you could only eat an egg which had been laid on the Sabbath if you killed the chicken for Sabbath-breaking.
- It was unlawful to move furniture on the Sabbath. There was an exception to this in that you were allowed to move a ladder on the Sabbath, but you could only move it four steps.
- It was not permitted to wear false teeth on the Sabbath (that must have been a hit in the synagogue services).
- It was fine to spit on a rock on the Sabbath, but you could not spit on the ground, because that made mud and mud was mortar, and that was work.¹⁴

Obviously by the time that Jesus came the Sabbath had been twisted into something that it was never meant to be. You can understand why the Pharisees were so upset with Jesus then when it appeared to them that he “worked” on the Sabbath. But Jesus knew what the Sabbath was about all along.

The Sabbath is about enjoying and resting and if my brother needs healing on the Sabbath, then I'm going to heal him. And if my friends are hungry on the Sabbath and I have food, then I'm going to feed them. It's not about being miserable and doing nothing. It's not about sitting in your house like a bump on a log; it's about enjoying and resting in what God has given to you and in what you have made yourself through your work.

The Pharisees problem wasn't that they didn't keep the Sabbath. Their problem was they forgot what the Sabbath was all about. The Sabbath is about enjoying the things God made and has given to you. For the Pharisees, it was all about checking a box and being able to say, "I did this...I did this."

The problem for us today is that we just plain blow through life and forget to take a day or even time of the day to Sabbath. We work so hard because we like the things we get from it, whether it's physical things, or money, or comfort, or status, etc. We look to our work to give us some of the things that God promises us to give.

And so what does this all mean? The Israelites had to keep the Sabbath as a way of showing if they were in relationship with Him. Then, the Pharisees kept the Sabbath intact, but they twisted it's meaning. Finally, you have Jesus, who is clearly "working" on the Sabbath but He's God and never sinned so surely he's not wrong. So what does it mean for us today and what ought we do with the Sabbath?

Let's take a look at Romans 14:5-6: "One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord."

Paul speaks with absolutes many times in the Bible. And all Paul would have had to do was say: "This is how you should keep the Sabbath..." but he never does. What he says, instead, is that regarding this issue you just have to be convinced in your own mind that what you are doing is right. Can you stand before God and say, "I am convinced I am keeping the Sabbath and here's how..." Or are you just blowing through life and not enjoying or resting in His creation at all?

Paul isn't telling us to abandon the practice. He's telling us to keep the command, but how you practice the Sabbath is up to you. So if for you, that means you take Sunday's off, great. If it's Saturday, cool. Whatever it might be for you. Maybe one week it's a Tuesday morning with a Thursday afternoon and a Friday evening. As long as your motive is to the Lord and you are enjoying and resting in His creation then it doesn't matter when you do it.

By all means, keep the Sabbath. But how you do it is up to you. Just make sure you do it. The more we keep the Sabbath and spend time resting in the Lord and His creation, the more we will find the life that we were made for.

Are you taking time to Sabbath? Are you taking regular time to rest and to enjoy and to receive what God wants to give you?

Bible for the Day: Mark 2:23-3:6 Here we read the story of Jesus doing things on the Sabbath and upsetting the Pharisees.

²³ *One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain.* ²⁴ *The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"*

²⁵ He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? ²⁶ In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

²⁷ Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

³ Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. ² Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone."

⁴ Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

⁵ He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Challenge for the Day: Take a day off! Use this day to enjoy what God has given you. It could be your faith, your family, your house, etc. In addition, what do you enjoy doing? Spend some time doing a hobby or interest of yours. All in all, I want you to enjoy the day but don't be too legalistic about it. And lastly, at some point in the day, spend some time with God in His Word and/or in prayer. If you can't take today off, take one of the next seven off. What'd you do on your day off? How did you rest and enjoy this world? Let us know at www.redletterchallenge.com.

11

“Let your light shine before others”

Matthew 5:16

It's important for us to not just talk about doing good things and meeting needs in the community, but to actually do them. It's how we show the rest of the world who God is! Take a look at what Jesus says in Matthew 5:13-16:

¹³“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

In *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Timothy Keller makes the following observation about salt:

“The job of salt was to make something taste good. I don't know about you, but I can't stand corn on the cob without salt on it. When I have eaten a piece of corn on the cob that I really like, I put it down, and what do I say? ‘That was great salt.’ No, I say, ‘That was great corn on the cob.’ Why? Because the job of the salt is not to make you think how great the salt is, but how great the thing is with which it's involved.”¹⁵

Jesus is calling you salt. As salt, our job is to go out and show people how great our God is. Every time I preach the success of the sermon is not based on what people think of me. It's based on if I preached about Jesus and how He is our hero. If I preach and someone walks away from the sermon and all they can say about it was “That pastor was smart,” or “That pastor was funny,” then I haven't done my job. My job is to point people and give all glory to Jesus, not to myself. That's what salt does.

For this challenge, your job as salt of the earth is to point people to God and show them how great our God is. That's really what it means for us to let our lights shine as well. Don't keep this light to yourself! By shining your light and being salt (in other words, by doing good works and meeting needs in the community) you show who God is to the rest of the world and ultimately fulfill what God has wanted all along for His people! God has wanted us to represent Him to the rest of the world from the beginning! This is what He wanted to do with the Israelites in the Old Testament; this is what He wanted for His disciples; and this is what He calls us, the church, to do today. The amazing thing is that Jesus actually says that someone can see the good deeds we do and glorify God because of us! That's incredible!

I want to caution you on something that I see quite often though. It seems obvious but I need to point it out. I've seen a lot of Christians who shine their lights really bright in places that are already pretty well lit. In other words, I've seen a lot of people who believe in Jesus, do good works, and say all the right things about God in places where there are already many other Christians. It's easy to shine your light in church or at a Christian small group; it's very hard to shine your light in dark places or places where there are no Christians or where your viewpoints and opinions are not the majority. God calls us to shine our light not just in church and in places around other Christians, but especially in places where there is darkness.

It's amazing to think that through what we do and the way that we live that we can actually point people to a real relationship with God. We may never know what kind of impact that our good deeds are making in somebody's life, but that's okay. We trust in what God says and we continue to give Him glory when we are being faithful to what He calls us to do!

Bible for the day: Exodus 19:3-6, Matthew 5:13-16, and 1 Peter 2:9-12: Notice how similar these sections are. God's plan from the beginning with the Israelites, to the disciples of Jesus, to the church today has always been that we would represent Him to the rest of the world by living a life of obedience and godliness.

Exodus 19:3-6: ³ *Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'* These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

Matthew 5:13-16 ¹³ *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.*

¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*

1 Peter 2:9-12: ⁹ *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Challenge for the Day:

Add events for Lake Mary, Mount Dora, and Casselberry

If you are unable to come out to a community event, then do something in secret to lift up or help someone you know and expect and require no praise. Post about what you did today to give others ideas of how they could be salt in this world. Go to www.redletterchallenge.com to share your experience today.

12

“Have faith in God.”

Mark 11:22

I read a story about a pastor dying of a snakebite at a church service. I was perplexed about this situation. He believed that if he handled the snake he wouldn't die but would rather be expressing his faith to the people. The article said he believed in a literal interpretation of Mark 16:17-18:

“¹⁷And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; ¹⁸they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.”

So here's this pastor, claiming a great service, displaying great faith in God, taking Jesus' words literally from the Bible, and he ends up dead. It looks bad on him, the church, and Christianity in general. What went wrong?¹⁶

The verses in Mark 16 don't say anything about how we are to go in front of others and prove our faith. In fact, God doesn't like when we try to prove to others how good we look on the outside. He would rather us practice humility.

All throughout the Gospels, Jesus talked negatively about this group of people called the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a prominent group of Jewish people that took satisfaction in keeping the Law of God and also in being noticed for how good they were. On the outside, the Pharisees did look good. But on the inside they were a mess. Jesus says at one point,

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”¹⁷

He also tells the Pharisees that if they are trying to gain the approval or applause of man, then their reward will be here on earth and not in heaven.

From the outside looking in on this snake-handling story, and forgive me if I'm wrong, I wonder if that's what happened in this story. Was he trying to prove his great faith so that others looked at him and said, "Wow, look at the faith of this man." In the end, even in his death, he got noticed for having a great faith.

God isn't asking us to hold up snakes in front of other people to prove our faith. He's telling us to spread the Good News, be loving and kind to our neighbors, practice generosity, spend time with Him, etc.

Sometimes God calls us to things that may be out of our comfort zone. And that frustrates us. Many of us like a life of comfort, safety, routine, and predictability. However, I believe God calls us to places and situations that will disrupt what could be a very safe, comfortable, routine, and predictable life. I believe God calls us to places and situations where we need God to show up!

There are times in our life when it is healthy for us to be stretched beyond our comfort zones. For followers of Jesus, this prayer is one that I hope everybody gets a chance to pray, “God, I don’t know why you called me to do this and I don’t really feel comfortable, and if you don’t show up, this is going to be a disaster.” In those moments, be assured that God will show up!

In fact, Jesus says in Luke 12:11-12: ¹¹“When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, ¹²for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.”

We should never worry about what to say or how we are going to look to the rest of the world. God has given us all the tools we need in the Holy Spirit to be able to be His lights and witnesses in this world today. He will call you to go to difficult places. He will ask you to witness to somebody that you'd rather not. In those moments, what will your answer be? Do you have faith that God will show up? Do you have faith that God will do great things in and through you?

Bible for the Day: Matthew 17:14-20: Jesus tells us all we need is faith as small as a mustard seed to move a mountain! How big is your faith?

¹⁴ *When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. ¹⁵ “Lord, have mercy on my son,” he said. “He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. ¹⁶ I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.”*

¹⁷ *“You unbelieving and perverse generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.” ¹⁸ Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment.*

¹⁹ *Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, “Why couldn’t we drive it out?”*

²⁰ *He replied, “Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”*

Challenge for the Day: I’m going to keep it somewhat broad today because everyone is unique, but do something to stretch yourself today out of your comfort zone. That

something could be a new activity, book, recipe, restaurant, hobby or meeting someone new. How did you stretch today? Let us know at www.redletterchallenge.com.

13

“Get up and walk”

John 5:8

If God asked you what you wanted from Him, do you know what you would say? The story from John 5, where our quote comes from today, was about a man who hadn't been able to walk for nearly four decades. Jesus met him and asked him, “Do you want to be healed?” In another story, Jesus asks a man, “What do you want me to do for you?”¹⁸ If you could ask God for anything or to do anything, what would you ask?

I consider myself a very blessed individual. I have always had good health and been able to walk. Even though I eat way too much fast food, I am still physically in good condition, though I could afford to lose a few pounds. I'm also blessed because I have always known what it means to believe in God and to pursue after Him. I know I mess up all the time but I've always been able to trust in God's grace and forgiveness in my life. Physically and spiritually I have certainly been blessed by God.

Not everyone is blessed to be both walking physically and walking spiritually in a relationship with God. If you have either one of those, know that you are blessed. If you have both of those, you are very blessed. If you are missing one or both, God has the power through the Holy Spirit and because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to revive you spiritually and to heal you physically. Jesus came to fix what was broken. He did that spiritually for all who call on Him by His death on the cross. He has grace and forgiveness for all who have messed up!

And physically He still has the power to heal whatever ails you. Do you believe it? Several days ago we talked about how Jesus claims that if anyone has faith as small as a mustard seed that they can move a mountain. God can do anything, and He wants to heal you, both spiritually and physically today. He wants to do great things through you and for you, but what do you want Him to do?

Bible for the Day: John 5:1-9: Here we have the story of Jesus healing the man who had been an invalid for nearly four decades!

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda^[a] and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ^[4] ^[b] ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

⁷ “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

⁸ Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

Challenge for the Day: Go for a walk today. On your walk ask God in prayer for the thing that you want.

While walking, pray for those neighbors you are walking past, for the community that you are a part of, and for God to do great things in the city in which you live. If you see someone on your walk who you don't know, meet them. God put them there today for a reason. Also, if you are physically and spiritually well, be grateful for that and praise God for it today!

If you are broken, can't walk, and/or need his healing, pray to Him today. Give Him your honest thoughts. Tell Him how you feel. Tell Him what you want. What did you ask for today? Did anything out of the ordinary happen on your walk today? Let us know at www.redletterchallenge.com.

14

“Go and proclaim the Kingdom of God”

Luke 9:60

One of the most influential books I’ve ever read is Dallas Willard’s *“The Divine Conspiracy.”* In this book, Willard gives us a clear picture of what life in the Kingdom of God looks like. Much of the book is based on Jesus’ fundamental message: The Kingdom of God. In the book, he talks about how often Jesus brought up the Kingdom of God and just how important it was to Him. Of course, he showed how important it is for us today as well. Willard describes the Kingdom of God this way, “The free availability of God’s rule and righteousness to all of humanity through reliance upon Jesus himself, the person now loose in the world among us.”¹⁹

I want to explain to you what the Kingdom of God means for us and how important it is in our lives today. Many churches and pastors teach the “Gospel of Forgiveness of Sins.” This is the Gospel that Jesus came, lived a perfect life, died on a cross for your sins, and now offers grace to you through forgiveness of your sins. If you believe in Jesus as your Savior, then all your sins are forgiven and you can enter into eternal life with Him. That is amazing news!

But it’s only a piece.

And if it’s the only piece you had or needed, then think about what you would do in this situation?

You have an upright citizen and member of the church who comes to his pastor and says, “I’m going to divorce my wife because I’ve fallen in love with someone else,” and the pastor, of course would say, “You can’t do this,” and the man says, “Of course I can, you’ve said that Jesus will forgive my sins if I believe that he died on the cross.” What would you say next? What could you say next?²⁰

If all you had was the “Gospel of Forgiveness of Sins,” then there’s really no real good response. Jesus would forgive him. Or would he? That’s where the Kingdom of God comes in. The Kingdom of God teaches us that, of course, Christ came to offer us forgiveness of sins and eternal life for all who believe, but it also teaches us that it’s not just about forgiveness. It’s also about us participating in and bringing the Kingdom of God to this world right now.

The Kingdom of God is simply the place where God reigns. And the good news about the Kingdom of God is that God wants to reign in us today. And when he reigns in us today, it looks like us becoming disciples and trying to become like Jesus.

If we are really pursuing Jesus and believe in the reality of the Kingdom of God in us then we would never want to divorce our wife because it's not right. We would never even pursue loving another woman if we were married because Christ or his disciples would have never done that!

There's the "Gospel of the Forgiveness of Sins" which is what makes us right before God and allows us to enter into eternal life with Him in heaven. And that's good news for the future. But there's also the "Gospel of the Kingdom of God" which compels us to become like Jesus today. It's good news for us today, that our lives can look more and more like Jesus as we follow after Him led by the power of the Holy Spirit. Both Gospels are important, and to me, they are one and the same. I don't believe you can have one without the other.

Jesus began his ministry in Matthew 4 with these words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus is announcing to us the availability of the Kingdom of God and inviting us all to be a part of that. He wants us all to be saved and live with Him in heaven forever. But even more important, he wants us to have good news today that God lives and reigns in you and you can make a difference and bring His kingdom today to someone else.

Bible for the Day: Acts 9:1-18: Here we see the story of Saul, whose name was later changed to Paul. Saul/Paul became a Christian, received forgiveness, was baptized and from then on, became a person who proclaimed the Kingdom of God like no one else before or after Him. He wrote many of our New Testament books, went on several missionary journeys, and planted churches wherever he travelled. The natural response for those who have been forgiven is to proclaim God's kingdom. But Saul/Paul wasn't always this way...check out his conversion story below:

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶ "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷ *The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹ For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.*

¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

¹³ “Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized.

Challenge for the Day: Go and tell someone today about the Kingdom of God and the Good News that Jesus came to give us. Was today a struggle? Comfortable or uncomfortable? Comment at www.redletterchallenge.com.

15

“Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you”

Luke 8:39

This may sound strange to you, but I find it very difficult and hard for me to pray with my wife. And my wife is an incredible follower of Jesus. You would think that because I'm a pastor and I have a dedicated follower of Christ as my wife that this would just come naturally to us. But, no, we don't pray much together. And many times when we do, it's not all that deep, whatever that means.

And here's something even stranger than what I just said: I know I'm not the only pastor or human being that has this problem. It's challenging for me to get into deep godly conversations at home. This, I believe is for two reasons.

One, I blame on my job. I'm a pastor and so I get into deep godly conversations all the time. Often times the last thing I want to do when I get home is more of my job. I love God, but I too want to relax, take a break from it, check out, and turn on a ball game.

The second reason I blame on myself. My family knows me better than anyone else. They see me up there as a pastor boldly declaring the Word of God and then they see me at home boldly failing to put into practice the same thing I just preached on. They see my failures and my faults and to them I'm a hypocrite. And how, as a hypocrite, can you teach the Word of God and lead your family into deep godly conversation?

It is often times hard to share God and the things He is doing in your life with your family. They know you better than anyone else, and so they will hear you talking about turning over your life to Jesus and how you are changing your life, and they will also be the first to know when you fail.

So does this mean that I don't have to lead my family? Or bring up godly conversation in the home? Or teach my kids about God? Should I leave that up to someone else? I bet you already know my answer! Heck no! It is my job. And whether or not I always want to do my job, it's still my responsibility.

You might not be a pastor like me, but I bet if you are a parent you can relate to being tired. I have many long, hard days at work and the last thing that I want to do when I get home is to be Mr. Dad. I remember just a couple of years ago having to help my wife with all of the following: changing my kid's diapers, feeding my kids food they don't like, hearing them fuss about it, then throwing them into the bath, putting their pajamas on, reading bedtime stories and praying with one while the other one makes a mess that we know we'll have to clean up, tucking the one in, going to help the other kid clean up previous said mess, praying with him, tucking him in and finally being able to rest. Being

a dad is not easy! But before all moms get upset with me, it's nowhere near as hard as it is to be a mom! Yes, I know there are way more moments of joy and excitement as parents that you have with your kids, but sometimes taking care of my kids is the last thing that I want to do.

And yet, even in the midst of changing dirty diapers and bathing my kids, I find it satisfying. There is this sense that I'm doing what God has called me to do right now. Of course, if I could get that feeling without changing any more diapers, I'd be alright with that! Sometimes pouring into your family and being a presence at home is harder than we feel like it should be, yet deep inside of us, when we are present and filling the roles that God has placed us in, we are satisfied.

You've heard about all the statistics and quotes about how important family time is. You've probably heard the phrase, "A family that prays together stays together." Yet it seems to me that families are spending less and less quality time together. It also seems, and research would back this up, that the family we have known for most of our American history, now looks very different than it has in the past. I know that everyone's situation is different, and sometimes difficult things have to happen in families, but it's time we pour more energy and love into our families and into those relationships than into serving ourselves and our own needs.

Time Magazine posted the following: "Studies show that the more often families eat together, the less likely kids are to smoke, drink, do drugs, get depressed, develop eating disorders and consider suicide, and the more likely they are to do well in school, delay having sex, eat their vegetables, learn big words and know which fork to use."²¹ It may not sound like a big deal to have a family dinner together, but clearly it's important. What's most important is that we spend time together doing things that glorify God.

And while we are doing this, God tells us that we can proclaim to them what He's done. The amazing thing is that we get to be the people, no matter if we are parents, children, cousins, etc. that tell each other about who God is. We get to talk about how much God has already done for us! He has sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins so that we might have grace and be ushered into a life where we want to follow after Him! That's the most amazing gift we could ever ask for! Likely, He's done a lot of other things for us as well. Who better to share that with than our own family?

It doesn't matter what our job is. It doesn't matter how tired we are. We are called to be witnesses, and especially in our own family. How can you be a better witness of God's love today in your home? Are there ways in which you can engage in godly conversation more often? Do you pray with your spouse? All of these questions are good to consider when talking about declaring what God has done in our homes.

Bible for the Day: Luke 8:26-39: In this story, Jesus performs another miracle, and the natural response for those that were there was to go and proclaim what Jesus had done to everyone, including their families!

²⁶ Jesus and his disciples sailed across Lake Galilee and came to shore near the town of Gerasa. ²⁷ As Jesus was getting out of the boat, he was met by a man from that town. The man had demons in him. He had gone naked for a long time and no longer lived in a house, but in the graveyard.

²⁸ The man saw Jesus and screamed. He knelt down in front of him and shouted, “Jesus, Son of God in heaven, what do you want with me? I beg you not to torture me!” ²⁹ He said this because Jesus had already told the evil spirit to go out of him.

The man had often been attacked by the demon. And even though he had been bound with chains and leg irons and kept under guard, he smashed whatever bound him. Then the demon would force him out into lonely places.

³⁰ Jesus asked the man, “What is your name?”

He answered, “My name is Lots.” He said this because there were ‘lots’ of demons in him. ³¹ They begged Jesus not to send them to the deep pit, where they would be punished.

³² A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. So the demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and Jesus let them go. ³³ Then the demons left the man and went into the pigs. The whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and drowned.

³⁴ When the men taking care of the pigs saw this, they ran to spread the news in the town and on the farms. ³⁵ The people went out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they also found the man. The demons had gone out of him, and he was sitting there at the feet of Jesus. He had clothes on and was in his right mind. But the people were terrified.

³⁶ Then all who had seen the man healed told about it. ³⁷ Everyone from around Gerasa begged Jesus to leave, because they were so frightened.

When Jesus got into the boat to start back, ³⁸ the man who had been healed begged to go with him. But Jesus sent him off and said, ³⁹ “Go back home and tell everyone how much God has done for you.” The man then went all over town, telling everything that Jesus had done for him.

Challenge for the Day: At some point today, gather the family around or whoever you are living/hanging out with and declare what God has done for you (maybe it’s over dinner). Pray with your whole family and have everyone in the family pray at least one sentence.

Try doing this as a family for a week. If you don't know what to pray, you can start by thanking him for all the things He has given to you and done for you. How did it go? Share with us at www.redletterchallenge.com.

16

“Judge not”

Matthew 7:1

If people were to ask me to describe God, the first word I think of is grace. His grace is the Gospel, or Good News that He calls all of us to believe: that Jesus Christ came to give us all grace, and that by His grace we are saved.

Grace is a free gift given to us by God, not by our own works, but by His love. The grace of our God comes to us from the cross where Jesus took upon himself our sin and our punishment, and gives us forgiveness. This gift of grace calls us and compels us to live a life like Jesus.

If God is known for being a God of grace, then shouldn't His people, the church, be known for being a people of grace as well? Then why is it that we are known for the exact opposite of grace?

If grace is getting something we don't deserve, the opposite would be getting something you do deserve, and that's called judgment.

And the church is known for being judgmental. It's one of the first words, if not the very first word, that people use to describe the church. And that frustrates me and it saddens me and it should for you too.

How in the world could the church be known as the exact opposite of the God that it worships and celebrates? How have we gotten things so screwed up that we are known for the exact opposite of what God wants us to be known for? Think about that. It's terrible. God is known for grace. His people, who supposedly have received that grace, are known for the exact opposite: judgment.

I hear all the time that our country, our cities, our leaders are headed in a downward spiral...that morals are being thrown out the window...that we are not even a shadow of what God wants us to be. And I agree with that. But when we focus on statements like that and focus on what's wrong with the world, we lose sight of the fact that I myself, am pretty messed up. And I'm not who I'm supposed to be.

It has been said today that the most often-quoted Bible verse today isn't John 3:16 anymore, it's Matthew 7:1: "Judge not unless you want to be judged."²² Outsiders or non-believers are scared to walk in the doors of our churches or to hang around "Christian" people because they're afraid of what we're going to think about them.

And that saddens me. In fact, it ticks me off. Number one, because it's exactly the opposite of what we should be known for, and number two, because it's true. The church is pretty judgmental. But it doesn't have to be.

I remember this Super Bowl commercial from several years ago. A man is preparing a romantic dinner. He chops vegetables with a large knife, while tomato sauce simmers on the stove. A white cat knocks the pan of sauce onto the floor and then falls into the mess. Just as the man picks up his tomato-splattered cat, his wife opens the door. She sees him holding a cat dripping with red sauce in one hand and a large knife in the other. The scene appears to be unmistakably horrific.

Things aren't always as they first appear.

There was another story a few years ago where this grocery store check-out clerk wrote to Ann Landers, this famous advice-columnist.

She said she had seen people buy "luxury" food items—like birthday cakes and bags of shrimp—with their food stamps. The writer went on to say that she thought all those people on welfare who treated themselves to such non-necessities were "lazy and wasteful."

A few weeks this appeared in Ann Landers column:

"I'm the woman who bought the \$17 cake and paid for it with food stamps. I thought the check-out woman in the store would burn a hole through me with her eyes. What she didn't know is the cake was for my little girl's birthday. It will be her last. She has bone cancer and will probably be gone within six to eight months."²³

You never know what other people are dealing with.

You know, right after that judging passage in Matthew 7, Jesus says, "Why do you notice the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye, when you've got a plank in your own eye?"²⁴

This is one of the most obvious and sarcastic sayings of Jesus. And that's why I love it!

Whenever you get a bug in your own eye, it's a pretty big nuisance. You know what I'm talking about. Your sight gets blurry, and you see what appears to be a little black speck in your eye. Your eyes start to itch and so you go inside, you're washing your eye out and finally you get it out. It's a huge relief. And that's all for just a little bug!

Can you imagine, for a moment, and I know this silly, but imagine actually having a plank in your own eye. If you do all of that for a little bug in your eye, think about what you would do if you had a giant plank in your own eye! Everybody sees your plank. If you literally have a plank in your own eye, you cannot walk anywhere without people looking at it. It's huge and you're knocking into people. You've lost all sight in that eye because the plank is so big! Wouldn't you want to do everything you could to take it out? If you've got a plank in your eye, you're not worried about anything or anybody else in the world. All you are worried about is how do I do get this dang plank out of my own eye?

And what Jesus is teaching us is this: You have an opportunity, through the grace Jesus won for you to live a life without that plank and you are worried about a little speck of dust in someone else's eye?

Rather than seeing everything wrong with everybody else, God is giving us an opportunity to love people. And it's only because God has taken the plank out of our own eye for us. That's what motivates us to love them. He has removed your plank by the precious blood of Jesus and he gives us an opportunity to share that Good News with everyone else.

What if, rather than judging people, the church was known for embracing people where they're at? Loving them where they are. No matter if that's as close to God as possible, or far, far away from God. What if we stopped trying to change people and just accepted them? What if we remember that we are not the one that's supposed to change somebody? That's God's job. The Holy Spirit does that.

What if our churches, and all followers of Jesus, accepted other people? Celebrated people who were different?

What if God was known for judgment and not grace? It wouldn't end well for us. So why then do we want to settle for being known for judgment, when we worship and honor a God of grace?

It is not your job to judge them. It is your job to love people the way that God loves you and to show them how awesome a life free from the plank is!

Bible for the Day: Matthew 7:1-5: Here is the quote in the context of Jesus' teaching. If you want to go even deeper on the topic, check out a sermon I recently preached based on this topic: <https://vimeo.com/40820641>.

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

³ "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Challenge for the Day: Nail a plank in your eye and walk around with it today and check out people's reaction. Okay, just kidding! Today, I really want you to do two things:

1) Thank God in prayer for the opportunity we have to live a plank free life free of the judgment we deserve.

2) After that, ask forgiveness to someone you've judged in the past.

Was it hard to do? Share online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

17

“Love your neighbor as yourself”

Matthew 22:39

Let's be honest: there are some weird and frustrating neighbors out there. Some are too loud, some are too dirty, some let their yards go, some let their kids go crazy, some have way too many cats for our liking, and some even steal our Internet signals!

When Jesus says, “Love your neighbor as yourself” the natural question to ask is “Who is our neighbor?” In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, there was an expert in the Law that asked Jesus that exact question. He wanted to know exactly who was considered his neighbor so he knew who he had to help and who he didn't have to help.

Jesus then went on to tell this story of a man, who was stripped, beaten, and laid on the side of the road, all bloodied up and in need of help. Two so-called righteous people (what would be considered priests or pastors today) pass by this man. Then a third man passed by. He is a Samaritan man, which is important for our story, because that means he was from the rival town of the man who was beaten up. He sees his rival in need and takes care of him. Jesus was essentially telling us that anyone who is in need is our neighbor. Being a “neighbor” doesn't have to mean the people you live right next to, though they are also your neighbors. A neighbor is anyone you come into contact with.

Let's face it...most of the time we don't walk on a road and see someone bloodied up that needs our help. In fact, the most common example of a modern-day “Good Samaritan” story that I often hear preachers or teachers talk about is helping out someone who is on the side of the road when their car breaks down. I often have felt guilty because I have driven past people in this situation many times. But the reality is that if someone's car broke down on the side of the road, and that person was looking for someone to stop and help them, I would be one of the last people they would ever want to stop. Why? Because I know nothing about cars! I essentially have nothing to offer them except for good moral support and pastoral counseling on the frustrations of broken-down cars. Maybe I'm just trying to make myself feel okay about this situation, but I think what Jesus is trying to tell us is that if we see a neighbor in need and we really legitimately have the ability to help, then by all means, do all that you can to help. Use your gifts and talents for the benefit of your neighbor.

The fact is that we may complain about our neighbors, and sometimes it may be hard to love them. But the reality is that God can look down on us and say the same thing. Why do these people act like this...they are messy, they don't listen, they have no regard for me, they are not taking care of the stuff I've given them, etc. It has to be hard for Him to love us. He could look at us and say, “I'm done with them,” or He could look at us and say, “They need my help.” Thankfully, he's chosen the latter. He loves us so much that He

sent Jesus to die on the cross for us and to pay the price for the sins that we commit! Through His death and resurrection all who believe in Him are given eternal life! And not just eternal life one day when we die, but eternal life now! We can participate and work with Him now in bringing His kingdom to this world. How do we do that? By doing what Jesus did for us...loving our neighbors.

Bible for the Day: Luke 10:25-37: This is the story of the Good Samaritan and in it Jesus tells us that all people are our neighbors and that we are called to help anyone in need.

²⁵ *On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

²⁶ *"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"*

²⁷ *He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'^[a]; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[b]"*

²⁸ *"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*

²⁹ *But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

³⁰ *In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii^[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'*

³⁶ *"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*

³⁷ *The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."*

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Challenge for the Day: Do something for a neighbor of yours. Show them you care. No strings attached. What'd you do? Comment at www.redletterchallenge.com.

18

“You give them something to eat”

Mark 6:37

“Someone else will take care of that.” How many times do we find ourselves saying that? When we hear about problems or somebody going through something difficult, sometimes our first response isn’t “How can we help,” but rather, “Someone else will take care of that.”

Today’s quotation from Jesus tells us that it’s not about someone else taking care of anything. God is directly telling us that it is our job to feed the hungry. He is calling His followers to take care of things themselves. “That’s somebody else’s problem” is not in the vocabulary of Jesus or anyone that would follow after Him. The truth is we all have gifts or talents or possessions that we can offer to the world around us to make it a better place. I love this story written by Peter Sagal:

“When Morgan was a young woman living in NYC she had trouble. She came from a difficult background and had trouble finding herself and was very uncertain of herself and for whatever reason she had become obsessed with Mother Theresa.

For some reason in her young mind at the time, this was around 1980-1981, Mother Theresa was the epitome of human beings. The best kind of human there was. And Morgan so much wanted to be like or with Mother Theresa. And one day she found out, she read in the paper, that Mother Theresa was coming to NYC. To visit the UN, or testify about something. Morgan was such a Mother Theresa fan and found out what hotel she was staying at, and stalked Mother Theresa. So she’s there on a curb outside the hotel and a car pulls up and Mother Theresa gets out. First all these nuns came out and finally here comes Mother Theresa.

Morgan runs up to Mother Theresa who was an old woman even at that time and says, “Oh mother Theresa, I’m so glad to meet you. The work you do is so wonderful and so important and I just want to come to Calcutta and do that work with you.”

Mother Theresa shook her head and said, “No, you don’t do this work because you think it’s good. You do this work because you so love the poor people of Calcutta that you can’t be away from them. That’s when you come and you do this work.” Morgan realized that she had been busted a little bit in a nice way and kind of nodded and understood.

Mother Theresa said, “Well what do you do?” Morgan said, “What I do isn’t important. What I do is I work in a theater and help put on plays. What use is that?”

Mother Theresa replied, 'There are so many different kinds of famine in this world. In my country there is a famine of the body. In this country there is a famine of the spirit. Stay here and feed your people.'"²⁵

Today's quote comes from the miraculous story of Jesus feeding 5000 people with only five loaves of bread and two fish. We read about this story as well in day 6! In this story, the crowds had been with Him all day and were hungry! The disciples wanted to send them home to get food when all of the sudden Jesus told His disciples, "You give them something to eat." Can you imagine what they must have been thinking? "How are we going to feed them? This man is out of his mind!" Jesus was testing their faith.

Andy Stanley describes this story well:

"What do you do when Jesus is actually standing there telling you to do something you know you can't do? Apparently you do what we do. You make excuses and tell him things he already knows...I'm not smart enough. I'm not educated enough. I'm not resourced enough. Get somebody else! But Jesus says, 'Just bring me what you do have and I'll work with that. Bring me your limited education, your lack of experience, along with your fear and insecurity, and watch what I can do'...if we, or the people in our churches, ever get to the place where we are willing to make what we have available to God, amazing things will happen."²⁶

For whatever reason, God has chosen to work with us in redeeming and restoring this world. He's chosen us to be the people that speak and act on his behalf. Many times I think He's crazy for doing it that way, but that's the way He's chosen. God believes in you. God believes you can make a difference. That's why He's chosen you. 1 Corinthians 3:10 calls us "co-workers" or "co-laborers" with God. We have already been called by God to work with Him. Many of us want to wait for permission to serve God or do something for Him, but I'm telling you God has already called you and given you the tools necessary to grow His kingdom! In fact, I believe so strongly in this idea that everyone is already called by God and the fact that He calls us co-workers with Him, that not too long ago on a Sunday morning I ordained everyone in my church to be a missionary and minister wherever they live, work, play, etc. Don't wait for permission from your pastor or someone else to do what God has put in your heart. God has called you and He's filled you up with the Holy Spirit to give you everything you need to make a difference in this world.

Bible for the Day: 1 Corinthians 3:6-18: This passage reiterates what we've just been talking about. Paul is telling the Corinthians that they are all a valuable part of growing God's kingdom. We are the seed-planters and God waters what we do. As long as God is our foundation then we are to continue in the endeavors and calls that He puts in our lives! Not only does God call us His "co-workers" in this passage, but He also assures us the Holy Spirit lives inside of us!

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹ For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰ By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. ¹⁴ If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

¹⁶ Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

Challenge for the Day: Go feed someone. Either do it directly or do it by giving food to an organization that is already feeding the needy. How'd it go today? Post at www.redletterchallenge.com.

19

“Let us eat and celebrate”

Luke 15:23

Now this is something that I can get behind: eating and celebrating! I love to eat and I love to celebrate. Who doesn't love a good party with great food? Amongst all of the grace, forgiveness, love, healing, teaching, etc. of Jesus, it may be hard for you to imagine Jesus saying a phrase like this, but I would argue that eating and celebrating is why Jesus came! But before we get to that, let's just call a spade a spade and say that amongst non-Christians, and even many Christians themselves, the perception of current-day followers of Jesus isn't really that we have much fun. A lot of people think that Christians are boring and not interesting at all.

Why is that? Many believe that in order to follow Jesus, you have to give up a life of fun. They believe that Christianity in general is restraining. In fact, Emma Goldman once said that Christianity is “the leveler of the human race, the breaker of man's will to dare and to do ... an iron net, a straitjacket which does not let him expand or grow.”²⁷ That's a pretty brutal assessment of Jesus' followers and sounds nothing like our quote today from Jesus.

People from the outside view Christianity as this set of rules, that we must live a certain way, look the same way, and that we “must not smoke, drink, dance, or associate with those who do.” Personally, I think it's sad that people view Christians like this and I think it's our fault for not truly living the way God has made us. John 10:10 tells us that Christ came to give us an abundant life. Too many times we portray that it's not an abundant life that we have, but a boring life.

In his book, *Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning quotes Robert Hotchkins from the University of Chicago, who says, “Christians ought to be celebrating constantly. We ought to be preoccupied with parties, banquets, feasts, and merriment. We ought to give ourselves over to veritable orgies of joy because we have been liberated from the fear of life and the fear of death. We ought to attract people to the church quite literally by the fun there is in being a Christian.”²⁸

I know that if you are following Jesus, your life isn't always easy. Sometimes we go through really difficult times. In fact, Jesus assures us that as His followers we are to expect persecution, suffering, and trials of all kinds. I'm not oblivious to that either. We don't need to walk around with fake smiles. But it's also imperative that we change the world's perception of Christ and His followers. If He gave us an abundant life and if we have all received His grace, then that ought to play out in our lives too.

The reality is that Christ came to free us to live a life of excitement, adventure, and ultimately a life that is more fulfilling. In Christ, we have received all the grace, mercy, and peace that we could ever want or need. Through the Holy Spirit we have confidence, strength, and a power inside of us that gives us the ability to do things that others won't. In fact, if we are honest, God has already answered all the hard questions in this life by the sending of His Son Jesus Christ. No matter what happens, even in the difficult times, we can have a hope, joy, and peace that those who don't know Christ don't have. Why in the world are we portraying that a life with Christ isn't joyful, celebratory, and just overall awesome?

Remember, that in the end, after Jesus comes back and no matter where you fall on what the end times end up looking like, we will be with Him forever in heaven. Revelation 19:9 tells us that we will be invited to the wedding feast of Jesus Christ! We're going to eat and celebrate forever in heaven with our God. Why not practice today?

Today, I want you to celebrate what God has done for you. I want you to live your life with joy and peace today, because that's what Christ has won for you! It's time to embrace the life that Christ has made for you and go out and have fun! And go have fun with others!

Bible for the Day: Psalm 98: There are many psalms that express that we have joy in the Lord...Psalm 98 is one of them!

- ¹ Sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.*
- ² The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.*
- ³ He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.*
- ⁴ Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;*
- ⁵ make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,*
- ⁶ with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.*
- ⁷ Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.*
- ⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands,*

*let the mountains sing together for joy;
⁹ let them sing before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.*

Challenge for the Day:

It's community event time!

Events at Lake Mary, Mount Dora, and Casselberry

If you are unable to participate at your church event, then do the following: Throw a party. Eat and celebrate with family or friends. Celebrate what Christ has done for you! Show the world that Christians can have fun too! How'd you celebrate today? Comment at www.redletterchallenge.com.

20

“Pray like this”

Matthew 6:9-13: Great

Martin Luther once said: *“How many pray the Lord’s Prayer several thousand times in the course of a year, and if they were to keep on doing so for a thousand years they would not have tasted nor prayed one iota, one dot, of it. The Lord’s Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth. Everybody tortures and abuses it; few take comfort and joy in its proper use.”*²⁹

I remember getting in a lot of fights with my older brother. Nothing serious, just kids being kids. And I hated when my mom told me I had to go up to him and tell him I was sorry and that I loved him. Why did I hate doing that? The same reason that you did too... you weren’t sorry at all and didn’t feel like saying something that you didn’t really feel inside. And I still don’t really like doing something just for the sake of doing something. I feel this way about the Lord’s Prayer as well.

Today’s quotation, “Pray like this...” is Jesus’ response to how we ought to pray. We call it “The Lord’s Prayer,” but a better thing to call it may be “The Disciple’s Prayer.” It is what the disciples of Jesus are taught to pray. The Lord’s Prayer is one of the most recited passages or words or phrases of all times. Christians have it memorized, and even some non-Christians could recite it to you word-for-word. I don’t believe that Jesus intended for it to be recited thousands upon thousands of times; simply that he was teaching us a model for how we ought to pray. Yet because of its simplicity, beauty, and meaning it has become something that we recite; and that’s a beautiful thing. Or is it? If we take what we’ve already learned in this 40-day challenge-- that Jesus cares more about your heart and the inside than he does following the letter of the law itself--then we can apply that to today’s challenge as well. Jesus cares more about where our hearts are at when we pray this prayer than he cares about how many times we uselessly recite this prayer.

Martin Luther continues his thoughts above when he says, *“What Christian has not been dismayed by his own indifference to the Lord’s Prayer? What believer has not been chagrined when once again she has offered an unthinking parrot-like recitation of this prayer while at the same time mentally reviewing the possible lunch menus when the family returns home from church?”*³⁰

What he is getting at is the same thing I’ve been getting at too. If you recite something and don’t mean it, it doesn’t count. It’s worthless. Just because you do something on the outside doesn’t mean a hill of beans if your heart isn’t right first. Jesus would rather you take one line of the Lord’s Prayer and really believe it, dwell on it, mean it, and practice it than for you to simply recite it. There is absolutely nothing wrong with reciting this

prayer, even multiple times in a day. In fact, I encourage you to do that. I just want to make sure we mean it first and aren't just going through the motions!

Tradition has it that this prayer is so powerful that when one of the scribes back in the first century AD was reading this prayer he was so overwhelmed and overcome with emotion that he wrote in the side of his Bible that he was translating, "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen." Other scribes thought this actually was the close of Jesus' prayer and we still use that line today to close the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is so powerful that I just want to remind us to take our time with it and not simply to say it just to say it.

Bible for the Day: Matthew 6:5-14: This is the Lord's Prayer and its surrounding context.

⁵ *"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

⁹ *"This, then, is how you should pray:*

*"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,^[a]
but deliver us from the evil one.^[b]"*

¹⁴ *For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.*

Challenge for the Day: Take the prayer petition by petition today and set your watch/ phone to signal you every hour to pray one of the petitions and think about over the course of the next hour. It should take 10 hours!

First hour: Our Father who art in heaven;

Second hour: hallowed be thy name,

Third hour: thy kingdom come,
Fourth hour: thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Fifth hour: Give us this day our daily bread;
Sixth hour: and forgive us our trespasses,
Seventh hour: as we forgive those who trespass against us;
Eighth hour: and lead us not into temptation,
Ninth hour: but deliver us from evil.
Tenth hour: For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and
ever. Amen

How did it go today? Did the prayer have any more meaning today in your life than it has in the past? Let us know at www.redletterchallenge.com.

21

“Worship the Lord your God”

Luke 4:8

Before Jesus began His ministry He went into the desert. He endured three temptations. The second temptation was when the devil took Jesus to a high place and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and offered to give them to Jesus if He would just bow down and worship him. Jesus’ response, echoing words from the Deuteronomy 6:13, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.”

What is worship? The definition of worship is: “The reverent love and devotion accorded to a deity, an idol, or a sacred object.”³¹ Many people, even Christians, equate worship with a 60 or 75-minute long (Please nothing more than 90!) service on Sunday morning. And that service certainly is worship. But worship is much more than that. God is not confined to a building or a time frame, so why do we feel like our worship should be? Worship really describes who we are 24/7. If to be worshipful means having expressions of reverence and adoration for a deity, then doesn’t that mean we are, or at least can be, worshipping at all times? Harold Best says, “We do not go to church to worship, but, already at worship, we join our brothers and sisters in continuing those actions that should have been going on-privately, family, or even corporately - all week long.”³²

To confirm this, Paul says to us in Romans 12:1: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” What he’s saying is that our whole lives are worship. What we do, whenever we reflect the love of God and a real relationship with Him, we are worshipping Him! Martin Luther once said, “The worship of God....should be free at table, in private rooms, downstairs, upstairs, at home, abroad, in all places, by all peoples, at all times.”³³

What they are all saying is that worship happens when I’m around others *and* when I’m alone. In public *and* in private. Worship ought to happen at home privately one-on-one. And worship ought to happen within a church community as well. No matter where you are or what you are doing you have the potential to be ascribing worth, praise, and glory to God. Look at your life this way and it will start affecting the everyday decisions that you make! Pretty soon you’ll be asking yourself, “If I’m worshipping God right now, would I do this? Would I go here? Would I buy this? What would I do here?” And if you find yourself asking those questions more often, you are on the right track!

Bible for the Day: Psalm 96: The Psalms are a great place to get lost in worship. This one is a Psalm of praise. Psalm 33, 92, and 100 are also some other favorites of mine.

- ¹ Sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
- ² Sing to the Lord, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation day after day.
- ³ Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among all peoples.
- ⁴ For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;
he is to be feared above all gods.
- ⁵ For all the gods of the nations are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
- ⁶ Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and glory are in his sanctuary.
- ⁷ Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- ⁸ Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering and come into his courts.
- ⁹ Worship the Lord in the splendor of his^[a] holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth.
- ¹⁰ Say among the nations, “The Lord reigns.”
The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity.
- ¹¹ Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
- ¹² Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
- ¹³ Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Challenge for the Day: Spend some time today in intentional one-on-one worship with God, free from distraction. It could be listening to praise music, reading the Psalms, praying, etc. Do it for at least 30 minutes today. Mention what you did online or songs you listened to to give others ideas of how they can worship at www.redletterchallenge.com.

22

“Forgive others their trespasses”

Matthew 6:12

This quote from Jesus is one of the most difficult challenges to complete. I know this, because when our church went through this particular challenge before, it had more comments than any of the other challenges. It's really hard to forgive other people. But, the reality is, it's even more detrimental for us to continue to live with the baggage of holding onto things that don't need to define us or slow us down from being who God has created us to be.

To forgive means that you are letting go of something and giving it to God because you believe He will enact better justice than you could. It's the opposite of taking revenge. It is, in fact, letting go.

Jesus mentions forgiveness quite often. And not only does He mention it, but He lives by it as well. Jesus follows this way of forgiveness all the way to the cross, and even as He was hanging on the cross, He forgives the people who are killing Him, so He literally takes this way of forgiveness all the way to the grave. "When Jesus prayed for his enemies to be forgiven as they drove nails into His hands, He was living His own sermon, and validating His right to preach it."³⁴ So if we are going to be Christians and learn to follow after Jesus, then we are going to have to be a people that forgive. And that's there nothing that can be done to us or done in the world that we are not called to forgive.

At least that's what we say. But what about this situation?

Simon Wiesenthal was an Austrian Jew imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. While working in a hospital there was a twenty-one year old German SS Soldier named Karl Seidl who is lying on a bed about to die. His last request is that he wants to talk to a Jew, any Jew, and Simon Wiesenthal was that man. Karl has been mortally wounded and wants to make a deathbed confession, and he wants to do it with a Jew. For several hours he pours out his heart and how sorrowful he is for all the things he has done, getting into specific stories, and specific killings that he had not only witnessed, but taken part in. Some of the descriptions of the murders that he mentioned Simon remembered and even remembered losing friends and loved ones. While he was speaking, Simon remained silent and didn't say a word the entire time. After hours of confessing, the last thing he asks is if a Jewish man could forgive him for all the wrong that he had committed. Simon writes about this experience in his book *The Sunflower*. In the book, he asks this question,

“Ought I to have forgiven him? Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong? This is a profound moral question that challenges the conscience of the reader of

this episode, just as much as it once challenged my heart and mind...The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of forgiveness. Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of, but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision. You, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can mentally change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question, "What would I have done?"³⁵

The rest of his book has 53 different prominent thinkers weigh in their opinion of whether he should forgive him or if forgiveness is impossible in this situation. 28 of the authors said, "No" forgiveness is not possible, 16 said "Yes," and 9 were unsure. Interestingly of the 16, 13 of them were Christians and 3 were Buddhists. But what would you say? How would you respond?³⁶

This is a difficult circumstance and something I hope would never happen to any of us.

As followers of Jesus we are called to forgive, but even in this situation? Or is this an exception to the rule? Is there a limit to forgiveness? Or is it always possible? It's a question we can all relate to because we have all been wronged by somebody in this world.

Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, once asked Jesus how many times we are called to forgive a particular person.

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."³⁷

Peter was looking for an answer or a limitation on forgiveness. He thought he was being generous by suggesting seven times. But Jesus' response took it to the extreme when he tells Peter, seventy-seven times. Other translations say seventy times seven. All scholars believe that whether Jesus meant seventy-seven or seventy times seven, that he wasn't being literal, but rather these numbers suggest a never-ending limit on forgiveness. Because the numbers seventy and seven are of significance all throughout the Bible as numbers that mean perfection, completion, etc. they symbolize the fact that we ought never be done forgiving someone. I would argue, even the motive of keeping score on forgiveness, is a wrong motive as well, as the apostle Paul would later say that "love keeps no record of wrongs."³⁸

Jesus teaches us a lot about forgiveness. He stretches us beyond where we are comfortable. Not only does He suggest limitless forgiveness, but the way in which God forgives is that He completely restores us in our relationship with Him. This is different in the way in which our world works. In our world, if somebody wrongs us, we may eventually forgive them, but often times; there are still consequences for that sin. For

instance, if you steal from work, your boss may forgive you, but you may be out of a job. If you cheat on your spouse, your spouse may forgive you, but you may go through a divorce or have a relationship that's never the same. If you spread rumors about someone, you may be forgiven, but you may no longer be in that person's life.

Things, situations, and relationships change after sin enters. But when it comes to God, He forgives us, completely restores us (He doesn't change our status), and then He goes a step further and gives us the most important responsibility or job any of us can have: to lead other people to Christ. I'm thankful that with God's forgiveness, He gives us another chance to live right with Him.

My favorite story of forgiveness in the Bible is when Jesus forgives Peter for denying Him three times. I like it so much because this was arguably Jesus' best friend and he let Jesus down at the moment when Jesus needed him most. He denied ever knowing Him while his best "friend" suffered and died on the cross. Jesus rises from the dead, comes back to Peter, and then forgives Peter three times for denying him three times, and then instantly puts Him right back to work with the most important job ever: to lead the first church! It's one thing to forgive, but it's another thing to completely trust someone and task them with the greatest responsibility in the world! It's amazing that He forgives him and then instantly puts him to work, despite his past behavior.

The very essence of who God is was shown to us at the cross when Jesus died for all of our sins. Christ paid for all of our sins and now he calls us to be like Him. To forgive somebody is not only good for that person, but it's good for you too. When you forgive you become more like Christ which is what we are after in this challenge.

Bible for the Day: John 18:15-18, 25-26 and John 21:15-19: Here we see the stories of Peter denying Jesus in John 18 and then in John 21, after Jesus rises from the dead he meets Peter again and rather than rebuking him, Jesus forgives Peter and charges him with the task of being the leader of the church!

John 18:15-18, 25-26:

¹⁵ Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, ¹⁶ but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant girl on duty there and brought Peter in.

¹⁷ "You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" she asked Peter.

He replied, "I am not."

¹⁸ It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.

²⁵ Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing there warming himself. So they asked him, “You aren’t one of his disciples too, are you?”

He denied it, saying, “I am not.”

²⁶ One of the high priest’s servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, “Didn’t I see you with him in the garden?” ²⁷ Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.

John 21:15-19:

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

Challenge for the Day: If you’ve still been withholding forgiveness from someone that has done you wrong, pray to God about forgiving them. I pray that you would be led to actually forgive that person and let that person know of your forgiveness. How hard was today’s challenge for you? Let us know and if it was too hard let us know how we can pray for you at www.redletterchallenge.com.

23

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me”

Matthew 25:35

How many times have you heard your mom say, “Don’t ever, ever, ever take candy from a stranger?” Though she said it with good intentions, we are sub-consciously getting the message from a young age that we are to be fearful of strangers. And now Jesus is telling me that rather than running and being fearful of strangers, that I should instead welcome them?

Have you ever moved somewhere and nobody welcomed you? Or have you had the opposite happen: you’ve moved to a new place and someone went above and beyond to meet you and make you feel welcome?

I remember a couple of years ago we had a new family move in down the street from us. I didn’t think anything of it, but because I have an amazing wife, she wanted to welcome them. She baked them some sort of organic pumpkin bread (Side note: I actually didn’t like the bread and thought that she should just give them something that everybody likes like brownies or cookies). But they received the bread and whether or not they actually liked it, they really appreciated the fact that someone welcomed them!

It’s not the quality of the bread, but the gesture that counts! And, wouldn’t you know it, a relationship blossomed from that organic pumpkin bread and now they became a regular part of our church family and friends of ours!

I’m convinced that the best way to grow the church and the Kingdom of God is to continue meeting new people and getting involved in the community. If we become a Christian and surround ourselves with great Christian friends and only hang out with other Christians, it becomes harder and harder to expand outside of those Christian circles. But God never calls us to a life of comfort, safety, and ease, rather a life that pushes us out of our comfort zone. For whatever reason, pushing ourselves out of our comfort zone is difficult, especially when it comes to making new relationships and meeting new people. It was one of my goals this past year to get even more involved and continue to foster new relationships in the community.

Over the past year I’ve grown really close to a group of guys that I met playing racquetball, have met a lot more of my neighbors, and have taken part in multiple other activities outside of the church. This year I’m hoping to get more involved with my HOA and am looking for even more ways to meet new people. I wonder if you’ve made it a priority in your life. If not, why not? If you don’t ever meet anybody new, then how will the Kingdom of God grow through you?

What kind of things can you do?

It's not as hard as it sounds. What do you enjoy doing? You have interests and others have interests too. I love to play golf and there are others that love to play golf as well. As a result, I schedule a monthly tee-time for us and it is a great chance to invite both those already in the church and those who have no connection with a church. As we play golf and enjoy this wonderful game, we get to know one another. All the Christians in the group don't beat the non-Christian over the head with our golf clubs telling him about how loving and gracious our God is, but rather we just play golf. And as followers of Jesus, I wait for the Spirit to prompt me for when I might say a particular word about our God or our church.

But how do I know when the Spirit might prompt me? If you are in His Word on a daily basis, you will be in tune with God in such a way that you will know when it is that the Spirit wants you to say something or do something that will make an impact in this person's life.

I want to encourage you today to get more involved, especially with people that you may not know yet. You never know where God might lead your relationship. And so while you shouldn't take candy from a stranger, it's okay to go ahead and meet them!

Bible for the Day: Luke 19:1-10: In this story, we see how welcoming Jesus was of all strangers, including even the outcasts of society like tax collectors.

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Challenge for the Day: Say hello to some neighbors that you haven't met yet. Or start/join a group in your neighborhood or community around doing something you enjoy. Get in a new social circle! Meet new people. If this is too much for you to do on your own, ask a friend to accompany you. That's the only way those who don't know God will come to

know Him. How did today go for you? Was it easy? Hard? Did you want to do it? Not do it?
Share online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

24

“Lend, expecting nothing in return”

Luke 6:35

How many times have you truly given something and not received anything in return?

“At the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in England, a psychology professor named Melissa Bateson surreptitiously ran an experiment in her own department’s break room. Customarily, faculty members paid for coffee and other drinks by dropping money into an “honesty box.” Each week, Bateson posted a new price list. The prices never changed, but the small photograph atop the list did. On odd weeks, there was a picture of flowers; on even weeks, a pair of human eyes. When the eyes were watching, Bateson’s colleagues left nearly three times as much money in the honesty box. So the next time you laugh when a bird is frightened off by a silly scarecrow, remember that scarecrows work on human beings too.”³⁹

It may appear altruistic when you donate \$100 to your local public radio station, but in exchange you get a year of guilt-free listening (and, if you’re lucky, a canvas tote bag). U.S. citizens are easily the world’s leaders in per-capita charitable contributions, but the U.S. tax code is among the most generous in allowing deductions for those contributions.

Most giving, economists call it, is called impure altruism: You give not only because you want to help but because it makes you look good, or feel good, or perhaps you feel less bad. You’ve done it before, and so have I. You don’t have to feel bad if you do get something back in return. But I think the heart of what Jesus is saying is the reason and the attitude behind our lending/giving should never be to get something in return.

The reality is that it’s actually hard to give without not getting something in return. Even our verse in Luke 6:35 says, “Lend without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High...” Jesus even tells us that when we give and expect nothing back, that we will eventually get something back from God!

Ultimately we worship a God who gave up His most prized possession for us! He gave His very own Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us. Through His death and resurrection, He paid the entire price for all the sin that we’ve ever committed and ever will commit. He didn’t pay 99% of it and ask us to pay the last 1%. He paid it all.

As a follower of Jesus I know and believe in the reality of Jesus’ death and resurrection. How disappointing it must be for God to look at me and see that I still fail Him. If He sent Jesus expecting that after His death and resurrection we would be eternally grateful and therefore, back up our gratefulness, with a life of holiness, He must be very disappointed. God sent Jesus not because He expected perfection from us after, but simply because He

loves us. God sent Jesus knowing that even after His death and resurrection that we would fail Him.

That's what it means to lend, or give, without expecting in return.

When we give, it's not because we have to, it's because we want to. We want to follow in the footsteps of our Savior who laid the foundation for us to give even when we may not get anything back in return.

Bible for the Day: Acts 16:11-15: I love this story because of its simplicity. In the book of Acts there are miracles and healings all over the place, and then this simple story of a woman named Lydia. There was no synagogue or place to meet for the early Christians in Philippi and so after being baptized Lydia offers her house to the church. She expects nothing in return. All she wants is to be a part of a great Christian movement beginning in Philippi. What Lydia did was fill a big need for the church. She knew what the church needed; she knew she had it; and so she gave it to the church and her house become the headquarters for the church and mission work in Philippi.

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district^[a] of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

Challenge for the Day: Lend or give to someone and don't ask for or expect anything in return. How did today go? What were you able to give? Share Online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

25

“I was sick and you took care of me”

Matthew 25:35

I hate being sick! It is awful. Being a parent of two young boys it seems like someone is sick almost every other week in our house. As parents, the worst is when you are both sick and your little kids are actually healthy. There are not many things harder in this world than being really, really sick and having to care and look after two boys who are wound-up and ready to have some fun.

I've had a lot of people do a lot of great things for me in my life, but when someone does something for me while I'm sick it feels even more special. I remember one of the greatest things anyone has ever done for my wife and I was when our friend came and took our two boys to the mall for the afternoon when we were both sick! Other people have taken our boys for an afternoon before, but this particular time was so incredible just to get a break from the kids.

It's hard to be sick. When you are sick, it feels good to be taken care of and receive encouragement from others. Many times throughout the Bible, Jesus tells us how important it is to care for those who are sick or under-privileged. One of the ways people know you care about them is when you take time out of your day to show someone who is hurting or ill that you are thinking of them. You can do many things to care for someone who is sick: visit them, provide a meal for them, encourage them, give them a gift, pray for them, etc.

Today's devotion is very simple: not to neglect and/or forget the sick, but to care for them. When I'm healthy it's easy for me to forget that others may not be. Others could be in pain, hurting, and in need of healing and encouragement. We have to be there for those people at all times!

There's a story in the Bible about a man who was paralyzed. The man who was paralyzed had four friends and these four friends carried him on a mat all the way to see Jesus. When they got to the house where Jesus was, they saw the whole house was full of people. Rather than give up, they took their friend all the way to the top of the roof and dropped him through a hole in the roof so that he could see Jesus. When Jesus saw the faith of the friends he forgave the paralyzed man and then he healed him. I've always thought it was amazing that it wasn't the faith of the paralyzed man that made him better; it was the faith of his friends.

Listen, I don't know how or why God heals some and not others. It seems like he heals some that have faith and others who have no faith. But here's what I do know: the friends of the paralyzed man had faith in Jesus and their friend was rewarded because of their faith. This means that God can honor your faith and your commitment to others. When

you help a friend or someone in need, I'm not saying he always will do something miraculous, but He can and He has in the past.

Who do you know that is sick? Who do you know that needs encouragement? Being sick is not what we were meant for! We are looking forward to a time where Jesus promises us no more sickness, disease, death, or even tears! Jesus promises that all who follow after Him will experience this sort of life.

Bible for the Day: Mark 2:1-12: In this story, we see four friends take care of their friend who was sick! What an incredible example of how to care for someone in need and look, in verse 5 below, at how Jesus responds not to the faith of the paralyzed man, but instead the faith of the friends!

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. ² They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. ³ Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

⁶ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ⁷ "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

⁸ Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? ⁹ Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? ¹⁰ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, ¹¹ "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Challenge for the Day: If you know someone sick, visit them. Encourage them. Support them. Call them. If you can't do that, then send a gift or message to someone you know who is sick. Lastly, if you don't know anyone personally who is sick, write encouraging "Get Well" cards and drop them off at a hospital. How did your experience go today? Comment at www.redletterchallenge.com.

26

“Honor your father and mother”

Matthew 19:19

Throughout Jesus' ministry he often repeated a number of the Ten commandments. He certainly knew them well, and as a Jewish rabbi, He was expected to live up to them. I mentioned yesterday this prominent group of Jewish people called the Pharisees. They were known for their keeping of the Ten Commandments. But rather than doing it out of love, they did it out of obligation. And more than the Ten Commandments, they followed 613 other laws and rules for people to live rightly together. I'm confident that their initial intention was good. But the Pharisees became very legalistic and judgmental. They followed the commandments and looked good on the outside, but on the inside they were a wreck.

Jesus wants us to not only follow His commandments, but to do it with a good heart. It will be important to remember that during this challenge Jesus wants both from us: to follow His commandments AND to do them with good intentions. It's not about just checking off a list of things in which we've done. This is what Jesus had to fight against constantly with the Pharisees.

The reason I think Jesus got so frustrated with the Pharisees is because if they actually believed in Him as their Savior, they could have done so many great things for the Kingdom of God. Think about it: their actions were good. They lived moral and upright lives. Many of them became the leaders in their communities because of how trustworthy they were.

Their problem was that they just couldn't understand or receive grace. They thought in order to obtain eternal life that it depended on how well they did with the commandments. On how righteous they could become themselves. They believed that righteousness came through the following of the Law, not by believing in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

One of the Ten Commandments that Jesus re-instated in the New Testament was here in Matthew 19:19: "Honor you father and mother."

For some, this is an easy challenge, in fact, one of the easiest one's we've had yet! These people have great moms and dads who have given up so much of their own life just so their kids could have a great life. I am blessed to be included in this group.

But for others, this challenge may be the hardest yet. Because in this world, we have parents who abandon their children, want nothing to do with them, and have taken advantage of them.

God wants children to be loved and raised well, and he wants parents to be honored and respected. God could come down and do this himself, but he entrusts us with this responsibility.

Families are not perfect in this world, and that's where forgiveness comes into play. I know that both as a child and as a parent I have messed up. But I know that when I honor my father and mother, it brings glory to God. He was the one ultimately that instituted marriage and commanded us to be fruitful and multiply. He came up with the idea of a family! And however messed up your family may be, you have the opportunity to represent God through the way that you honor your parents and even in the way in which you forgive your parents.

And know this truth: that even if your entire family has abandoned you and wants nothing to do with you, you have a Heavenly Father who is nothing like your Father in this world. He is perfect. He loves you more than you could ever know. He protects you. He provides for you. And you are his child forever!

Bible for the Day: Ephesians 6:1-4: Here the apostle Paul tells us how our family relationships ought to look and how we are to treat each other. Notice that it's not just children who have the job of honoring their parents but also parents have the responsibility to bring up our children the right way: with training and instruction in the Lord.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise— ³ "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

⁴ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Challenge for the Day: Honor your father or mother, or someone who has looked after you and helped you to become who you are today. It could be a letter, a phone call, a gift, or any another surprise. Be creative! This one may be hard for some of you. If it is, pray to God and ask Him for strength to complete this challenge. How did you honor your parents today? Let us know at www.redletterchallenge.com.

27

“Go to the other side of the lake”

Luke 8:22

Sometimes it's hard to “go to the other side.” Sometimes we get really comfortable in the places we are at. Today, we see that Jesus went to the other side. In other people's minds, He talked to people that He shouldn't have been talking to; went places He shouldn't have gone, and acted at times in ways which people didn't think He should act. In almost every city or community there is “another side.” There's the way you live and then there's the way the “other side” lives. In some communities the other side may actually be separated by a lake; for some it may be separated by a highway; and in other places, you just know where the “other side” is. God is calling us as individuals and as churches to be lights and to go to the “other side.”

One of the problems for many lifelong or long-time Christians is they surround themselves in a Christian bubble. They only hang out with other Christians, spend most of their time outside of the house at the church, and when they are asked to invite their friends to church or tell them about Jesus, they pat themselves on the back because all of their friends already believe in Jesus and go to church. If this describes you, that's not necessarily a good thing!

I'm happy that you have so many Christian friends and family, but it's time you branch away from this. Certainly keep your Christian friends, but learn to make new friends. Meet new people. Get involved in your community in a new way. God put us in this world to grow in relationship with Him and then invite and help bring others into relationship with Him as well. How can we grow the church and the kingdom of God if we continually surround ourselves with people who already know Him?

The following is a great example of a church that was committed to the community, and not just one area or segment, but the whole community.

“Charles Spurgeon was an incredibly gifted writer, preacher, and pastor. He was pastor of Metropolitan Tabernacle in London in the mid-1800's. This was right around the time of the Industrial Revolution when people were flocking to London to live and abandoning the farms and small towns. As a result, the infrastructure of London wasn't set up for this great influx of people. Not only did London have a spike in laborers and factories, but also the number of under-resourced women, children, orphans and widows exploded in London.

The city was in crisis and the leaders didn't know what to do. Thus in the 1850's a lot of churches did what a lot of American churches have done in the last thirty years: they fled

the cities. These churches moved their locations to the outskirts of London. But Metropolitan Tabernacle, pastored by Charles Spurgeon decided, 'We're not going to do that. We're going to stay here. We see this an opportunity for the Gospel.'

And they stayed. And they looked at the needs of the people in the city and began engaging them with their problems. The problems of the desperately poor were most pressing and so they started fixing those problems. They created almshouses for people who lost jobs, built a large number of homes for the elderly and would care for them, created an orphanage where they educated, cared for, and fed thousands of orphans, created homes for single mothers who had lost their husbands...started a school for pastors to receive a theological education and helped clothe and provide books for them, started programs that were entrepreneurial in nature to expand the kingdom through business, etc.

It got to the point that if Metropolitan Tabernacle had shut down at any point during that decade of grappling with the problems of the Industrial Revolution, the city of London would have been crippled. They would have grieved the loss of the Tabernacle.

With all of the focus on meeting the needs of the poor and the people in London, Spurgeon never ignored the preaching of the Gospel. So many people began coming to church, including many lost people who had never attended a church that Spurgeon asked his Christian members not to attend worship once a month so the lost people would have space to come. Spurgeon saw 5000 people coming to worship at church each week, and his collections of sermons are regarded as some of the finest Gospel preaching ever published. Spurgeon and the Metropolitan Tabernacle 'preached the Gospel, and met the needs of the city-especially the poor.'"⁴⁰

That's an amazing mission for any church, and any Christian! May God give us a desire to "go towards" the other side and not "move away" from it. May we learn to move towards situations and places that may be out of comfort zone. May we learn that without Christ we were on the "other side" at one point, but because He came, lived as, immersed Himself into this world, died on a cross for our sins, and rose three days later, we are now on "His side." May we feel called to do as Christ did for us.

Bible for the Day: Acts 10-Acts 11:18: For some time Peter and the early church believed that the Gospel message of Jesus Christ was for the Jews only, but in this story God gives him a vision and a prophet to tell him the Gospel message is even for those on the other "other side": the Gentiles! The Gentiles included everyone else, all the non-Jews. The Gospel is for everyone...both those on "my side" and those on the "other side."

10 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³ One day at about three in the

afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. ⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

¹⁷ While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. ¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three^[a] men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

²² The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." ²³ Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. ²⁴ The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had

called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. ²⁶ But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”

²⁷ While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ²⁸ He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

³⁰ Cornelius answered: “Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me ³¹ and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. ³² Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ ³³ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” ⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be

baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

11 The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶ I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. ⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’

⁸ “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

⁹ “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

¹¹ “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴ He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

¹⁵ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with^[a] water, but you will be baptized with^[b] the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

Challenge for the Day: Go to the “other side” today. Take a walk there, pray for the people there, and if opportunity arises meet someone there. How did you feel on the “other side?” What kind of things did you pray for? Share online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

28

“Be ready”

Matthew 24:44

When is Jesus coming back? Many people have predicted and many people have been wrong! It's a fascinating question and you get such a variety of answers. Here's some answers I found from Google-ing the question not too long ago:

Chris wrote, "I think that apocalypse theorists are pretty funny. It doesn't matter how many times they're proven wrong, they always know that the next time is the real thing. To the people who say the world will end in 2012, I generally just say 'See you in 2013.'"

Antonio wrote "Never."

Dave wrote "Saturday morning. About 10:45."

Kate wrote "as I'm typi..."

Elijah wrote "I know when but I won't say, don't want to spoil the surprise..."

Tony wrote "he's already here, dude."

Many people think that if God really cared about this world Jesus would have come back already. All the suffering would be gone and we could be with Him forever. The fact that God hasn't come back has allowed many people to think that God doesn't care about this world anymore. They say that if He hasn't come back yet, He probably never will. God has seen the way this world has gone, all the sin, all the betrayal, the lying, the cheating, and chaos that we have created and he wants no part of it. They look at the fact that He hasn't come back yet as a sign that God has forever forgotten or turned His back on us.

But Peter tell us something different in 2 Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." He wants all people to repent and come to know Him! So how does this prove that God is caring about us? Shouldn't He just come back now to end all this suffering and chaos?

Think about it for a second: God's people have constantly betrayed Him and sinned against Him, and rather than pronouncing His relationship to us as dead and coming back right now, His first inclination is to be patient with us with the hope that we repent. Rather than coming down to Earth and judging us as guilty He is patient with us. He is willing to forgive. As humans, our first inclination when someone does wrong to us is not

patience, but rather revenge. We want to end that relationship right then and there. But God is patient, not wanting any of us to perish. There is still work here to be done.

So what does Jesus say about when He is coming back: simply that He is coming soon! He wants us to be ready and live like it would be tomorrow. How would your life be different if you knew Christ were coming back tomorrow?

Bible for the Day: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11: Jesus is coming back soon! For those that believe in Him, we will rise from the dead and be with Him forever. Paul tells us to encourage each other with these words!

¹³ Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴ For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵ According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

The Day of the Lord

⁵ Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵ You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰ He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Challenge for the Day: Spend some time asking this question, "What if God came back tomorrow?" What changes would you make in your life if Christ actually were coming back tomorrow? Write 3 goals for yourself on how you can implement those changes. Brave enough to share your goals? Post online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

29

“When you give a dinner, invite the poor, crippled, lame, etc.”

Luke 14:13

Here's the context of what Jesus is saying today:

¹²Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

It's really easy to have a dinner and invite good friends or family. It's a lot harder to host a dinner and invite someone you may not know as well. Someone who may be poor, crippled, or lame. However, I have seen this happen before. In fact, my in-laws do this on a regular basis. Many times for the 4th of July or Easter or Thanksgiving they've invited into their house some foreign exchange students or those who have needed a place to eat and enjoy company with. It's something that I really look up to them for (I'm not just writing this because I know they'll read this and I'll get brownie points, though, that it is kind of a nice bonus). This quote from Jesus reminds me of one we had just a few days ago, “Lend, expecting nothing in return.” In that devotion I mentioned how many times we often give and actually receive something back for our gift, whether it's a tax deduction, a free tote bag, etc.

God wants us to be a people that just naturally give and don't expect anything back. In fact, in another section of Scripture Jesus says, “When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” Jesus wants us to be so natural at giving that we don't even recognize or realize that we are giving. It's just become natural for us!

Christians ought to be known as the most giving people in the world. We are called to be like Christ and Christ was someone who continually gave. He gave, in fact, until He had nothing left. I love the way Philippians 2 puts it:

⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

May we be like Christ and continue in this challenge and beyond to naturally become people that give. All of these devotions have been around things Jesus has said. And it's amazing how many of them come back to giving. It really makes me think that we have some work to do when it comes to generosity. Even those of us who give to the church on a regular basis...could we give more? Is there something that we are holding onto that someone else could use? I know that this challenge has been pushing us to give more, but when we look at the heart of Jesus and His words, there's no way of getting around the fact that Jesus' true followers are called to be generous! May we give like Christ gave of Himself!

Bible for the Day: Luke 7:36-50: In this story, Jesus is invited to a dinner by a prominent Pharisee. At dinner, Jesus spends more time and attention to a "sinful woman" than He does with the Pharisee. Jesus offers forgiveness to the woman who is repentant rather than the rich expert of the Law. Jesus gives to those that we wouldn't expect and calls us to do likewise!

³⁶ When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. ³⁸ As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

⁴¹ “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii,^[a] and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

⁴³ Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Challenge for the Day: Plan to host a dinner and invite someone or a group of people who could really use a nice meal. Or if it’s too uncomfortable for you to do this or you aren’t ready to this yet, team up with someone else, and offer a free meal in your community at a local park or non-profit. How did your experience go? Share online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

30

“Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while”

Mark 6:31

Michael Zigarelli, an associate professor at Charleston Southern’s School of Business, polled more than 20,000 Christians of all ages from 139 countries about the busyness of their lives and how it affects their relationship with God.

His report, which concludes almost six years of collecting data, echoes the obvious: yes, we’re busy people; and yes, our hectic lives prevent us from spending more time with God. It turns out that almost 60% of Christians around the world agree to the latter. This particular finding from Zigarelli’s study is particularly fascinating: Based on profession alone, pastors are the most likely to say they often or always rush from task to task, beating out business owners, lawyers, teachers, and salespeople.

Writing as a pastor, he says, “But maybe a study like this will wake some of us up to this reality: We, of all people, must find a way to place the Lord above every urgent need, every pressing appointment, every desperate cry.”⁴¹

You probably don’t need statistics or any study to tell you that we are busy. There’s just a lot going on. It is hard for us to spend significant amount of time with God.

Dallas Willard, one of my favorite authors, says this in *The Spirit of Disciplines*: “Solitude frees us, actually. The normal course of day-to-day human interactions locks us into patterns of feeling, thought, and action that are geared to a world set against God.”⁴² When we get so busy and fill our schedules every single minute of the day, we tend to lose sight and focus on God. We get wrapped up in some things that aren’t as important and, frankly, in some things that just don’t matter. We get caught up in things of this world, which many of them turn out to be, like Willard said, against God.

My grandfather, also a pastor, said something just recently to me as we were watching a basketball game on television. I am a huge sports fan and so was my grandfather, but over the years, his passion for sports has dwindled. He said to me, “Sports are interesting, but not important.”

This was actually convicting for me, because I spend a lot of time in my life on interesting, but not important things. I put a lot of hope, time, energy, money, and passion in following sports. Especially because I am a Cleveland sports fan, I am continually supporting teams that will fail me and let me down. No matter what team you root for, you will be let down at some point.

Then I realized I even follow after a lot of important things in this world, but they too will let me down. Family, friends, job, house, and money are all important in this world, but will all let you down at some point.

Some of you have had families that have failed. They have ended in divorce or your kids didn't turn out the way you tried raising them. Some of you have been there for your friends when they needed you, but when you needed them, they were nowhere to be found. Some of you, for good or bad reason, have been let go or fired from your job. Others bought a house, and couldn't keep it up and lost it. Or maybe you are like me, thinking you were doing the smart thing, and bought a condo in 2005 only to sell it 7 years later for 35% of what I paid. We lost a whole lot of money! And speaking of money, it has the potential to let you down as well. Many of you have experienced that in the last 5 to 10 years with the economic recession.

My point for bringing this up is that Jesus wants to be our top priority. We fill our lives up with interesting and even important things, but leave out time for who is most important and that is Jesus! The amazing thing is that Jesus will never fail us or let us down. He will never leave us or forsake us. We follow after things of this world and they will always fail us. We spend our time, money, energy, passion, even our "resting" in things of this world, and we don't leave any time for Jesus. It's backwards!

Jesus wants us to have Him most important. It should not be hard for us to spend time "resting" in Him and in His Word. He demands that He would be our top priority in Luke 14, the section of the Bible that you will read in just a minute.

It's time we get more serious about spending quality time with God, even times of solitude where it's just us and God. In solitude, we purposely abstain from interaction with other human beings and shut ourselves off from other distractions that are a part of our life. It's healthy to do this at times.

Before Jesus made a very difficult decision, and perhaps the biggest decision of his earthly life, of which 12 disciples He would choose, the Bible says He went up on a mountainside and prayed through the night. After praying, He came and chose His disciples. Often times when we are seeking answers for difficult questions, even questions that could have more than one right answer, it's appropriate for us to spend some time praying and in conversation with God. Many times Jesus sought out places to either rest or pray. Both resting and praying for Jesus meant alone time with God. Our God loves it when we come to Him. After all, He created us for His pleasure. When we squeeze Him out of our lives and place other things where He should be, it's backwards from what God wants. This is one area where Americans, and even Christians really struggle. We can do better!

Bible for the Day: Luke 14:25-33: Here Jesus tells us to hate our families! That's awkward! His point is that if you want to be His follower, you have to put Him first, even

above your family. He has to be in an altogether different category of relationship! But He is worth it! He will never leave you or forsake you! He will never fail you. He asks you to give everything you have for Him, but we know that He gave everything He had for us!

²⁵ Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said, ²⁶ "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? ²⁹ For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, ³⁰ saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'

³¹ "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³ In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciple."

Challenge for the Day: Spend some time in solitude today. Take your Bible with you and get away from all the distractions...try it for 30 minutes and do even more if you can. Were you able to get away from everything else today? What did you read? What did you study? How did you rest? Let us know at www.redletterchallenge.com.

31

“Stay awake”

Mark 13:33

In 2007 a movie called “The Bucket List” came out. It was a movie featuring two terminally ill men who had lists of things they wanted to do before they died. They called the list a bucket list, which is a list of things a person wants to do before they “kick the bucket,” another phrase for “die.” Ever since then, people have been creating their own bucket lists. On the bucket lists is anything from travelling, attending sporting events, accomplishing physical feats, relationship changes, service projects, etc. In fact, bucketlist.org apparently has over 1.5 million different goals that people have set to do before they die.⁴³

The one thing that the bucket list assumes is that the person will have time to complete the list. But, if we are honest, we all really have no idea how much longer we have in this world. Tomorrow could be our death or it could be the return of Christ. Too many times we live like death could never happen to us. When it happens to someone it shocks us. But it shouldn't. Everybody who has ever lived (with the exception of Enoch and Elijah) has died. We will too. Sometimes we need to remember that we are only here for a short time and during this time here in this world God asks us to fall in love with Him and follow after Him. That's it! This time we have in this world is only a blip on the radar compared to the eternity we will have with Jesus!

The phrase, “Stay awake” comes from Mark 13, a section where Jesus is speaking about the end. He's telling us to be ready and not to fall asleep in our faith. He's telling us the time to act as Christians and spread the love and grace of God is now, and not in the future because our future is unknown.

Jesus warns us that He will come back like a thief in the night. If you've ever been robbed or stolen from, it is likely the thief didn't call you ahead of time and set up an appointment and tell you exactly when they were going to steal from you! Likewise, it's ridiculous for anyone to guess when Jesus is coming back and tell you with certainty that they know it is a certain date and time. The idea of staying awake, is always being open to the possibility of Jesus coming back today. And if Jesus came back today, would you be happy with how you served Him? Or would you feel like you have some unfinished business for Jesus?

We never know when our time on earth will end. I remember when I was just 18 years old, right before college, getting into a very bad car accident where I was blind-sided by a truck going 60mph. The way the car was totaled and the impact the truck had on the car could have been enough to end my life. God spared my life and my perspective on life changed that day. In fact, that was the day that I gave my life to God and made the decision to enter into ministry as a pastor. But why do we have to get to the point where

we need something life-threatening to happen to us for us to wake up and get serious about following after God?

Everybody at the end is going to end up in a box or a jar or spread out over some waters. That's the reality. We leave with nothing except for the hope and promise of eternity with our God.

Creating a bucket list can be fun. It can be exciting. It's fun to enjoy the things and the world that God made. But what's more important is that you set goals and have a strategy that while you are here in this world you make the biggest impact you can for Jesus. Maybe you've thought about a bucket list before, but have you thought about creating a list of people that you can impact for Jesus one way or another.

If God is what is most important, then this list will be far greater and more important than any bucket list you can create.

Bible for the Day: Mark 13:32-37 and Matthew 24:36-51: These are the passages where Jesus warns/reminds us to be ready for His coming.

Mark 13:32-37:

³² "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard! Be alert^[a]! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.

³⁵ "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"

Matthew 24:36-51:

³⁶ "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, ^[a] but only the Father. ³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

⁴² "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.

⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken

into. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.

⁴⁵ “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. ⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’ ⁴⁹ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. ⁵⁰ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Challenge for the Day: Stay awake for 30 minutes extra and write down a list of some people that you want to impact in some way for Jesus Christ. It could be non-believers that you witness to about Jesus. It could be believers that you help or encourage in their faith. Post how today went and what kind of list you came up with at www.redletterchallenge.com.

32

“Let the little children come to me”

Matthew 19:14

In Matthew 19, people were bringing their children to Jesus so that he might heal their children. The disciples told the parents to back away and stop bringing the children close to Him. Here was Jesus' response: “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” Just one chapter earlier in Matthew Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”⁴⁴ Many times I've wondered, “What does Jesus mean when he tells us that we must become like little children in order to enter into his kingdom?” I've always thought it was more important to grow and mature and become adults, and now is he telling us the opposite?

I have two little boys, ages six and three. Practically I look at them and ask this question, “Why would God want me to become like my two little boys? Is there something that they do or something that they have that I'm missing?” So let's take a look at their lives and notice some things about them: they are very demanding, fussy quite often, rather selfish, don't share well, whine and complain frequently. In addition, they don't understand near as much as I do. They don't really contribute to society all that much yet, aren't paying any bills, and make huge messes wherever they go and expect someone else to pick up the pieces. They have no concept of the future, and are only focused on the present. They can't take care of themselves and are completely dependent on others. (I do love them by the way!) Why in the world would God tell me to become like this to enter into His kingdom?

There's one other thing I notice about them and I think this is what Jesus is getting at: they both have very sensitive spirits. They both feel really bad when they've done something wrong. They are genuinely sorry and they know they've messed up. And that's where God wants us: to be genuinely sorry, repentant, and acknowledge that we're imperfect. For when we realize we are imperfect, it's then that we also realize that Christ is the one that makes us perfect.

This echoes the very first Beatitude in Matthew 5 where Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The reality is the same here: the poor in spirit recognize they aren't perfect, feel genuinely sorry for it, and receive the grace of Jesus Christ to make us perfect. Children are really good examples of how to be poor in spirit today and something for us all to model.

Bible for the Day: Luke 18:9-14: In this story, you have someone that lived a good life and looked good on the outside. Then you have someone who was a failure according to this world's standards but was sorry for the life that he had lived. Which one are you? Which one resembles how a child would feel? Which one is poor in spirit?

⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

¹³ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

¹⁴ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Challenge for the Day:

It's Community Event Day. Click the link below for your event for your church.

Post links to community events for Mount Dora, Lake Mary, and Casselberry.

If you are unable to join the community event, I'm going to keep this challenge broad for you: bless a child who is in your life today and let them know how important they are to you. What did you do? How did your day go? Tell us at www.redletterchallenge.com.

33

“Become like a child”

Luke 18:17

A man was sitting on the edge of the bed, observing his wife, looking at herself in the mirror. Since her birthday was not far off he asked what she'd like to have for her birthday.

'I'd like to be six again', she replied, still looking in the mirror.

On the morning of her Birthday, he arose early, made her a nice big bowl of Lucky Charms, and-then took her to Six Flags theme park. What a day!

He put her on every ride in the park; the Death Slide, the Wall of Fear, the Screaming Roller Coaster, everything there was.

Five hours later they staggered out of the theme park. Her head was reeling and her stomach felt upside down.

He then took her to a McDonald's where he ordered her a Happy Meal with extra fries and a chocolate shake.

Then it was off to a movie, popcorn, a soda pop, and her favorite candy, M&M's. What a fabulous adventure! Finally she wobbled home with her husband and collapsed into bed exhausted.

He leaned over his wife with a big smile and lovingly asked, 'Well Dear, what was it like being six again?'

Her eyes slowly opened and her expression suddenly changed. 'I meant my dress size, you fool!!!'⁴⁵

Oh, to be young again! I can already tell my 5 year old wants to be a big boy and be like mommy and daddy. My 8 year old wants to do things and be like mom and dad. When we're young we want to be old. When we're old, we want to be young. What's the deal?

No matter how old you are, you can be a follower of Jesus. One of my favorite stories in the Bible was of David when he defeated Goliath. He was the little brother of a large family and yet he became the hero because he was the only one who had faith that God could destroy the monster Goliath through Him. Everyone else was scared.

Sometimes kids can do things that we aren't able to. My faith and my relationship with God really took off even before I hit high school. Eighth grade was really where God began to work in me in a real way. Don't think that just because of your age, or some

other excuse that you might make, that you can't do great things for God. In fact, Paul writes to Timothy and says, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity."⁴⁶

You, like David and Timothy, are capable of great things. Whenever God asks or calls you to do something, trust in His promise that He will never leave you or forsake you.

Bible for the Day: 1 Samuel 17: My favorite story as a kid was David and Goliath. I loved the story of the underdog because I was a really tiny kid until I got to high school. David was young, he was little at the time, but with God he defeated a huge monster that no one else was able to. Here's the story of David and Goliath!

Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Sokoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Sokoh and Azekah. ² Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. ³ The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them.

⁴ A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. His height was six cubits and a span. ⁵ He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels; ⁶ on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. ⁷ His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels.^[c] His shield bearer went ahead of him.

⁸ Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. ⁹ If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us."¹⁰ Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the armies of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other."¹¹ On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.

¹² Now David was the son of an Ephrathite named Jesse, who was from Bethlehem in Judah. Jesse had eight sons, and in Saul's time he was very old. ¹³ Jesse's three oldest sons had followed Saul to the war: The firstborn was Eliab; the second, Abinadab; and the third, Shammah. ¹⁴ David was the youngest. The three oldest followed Saul, ¹⁵ but David went back and forth from Saul to tend his father's sheep at Bethlehem.

¹⁶ For forty days the Philistine came forward every morning and evening and took his stand.

¹⁷ Now Jesse said to his son David, “Take this ephah of roasted grain and these ten loaves of bread for your brothers and hurry to their camp. ¹⁸ Take along these ten cheeses to the commander of their unit. See how your brothers are and bring back some assurance from them. ¹⁹ They are with Saul and all the men of Israel in the Valley of Elah, fighting against the Philistines.”

²⁰ Early in the morning David left the flock in the care of a shepherd, loaded up and set out, as Jesse had directed. He reached the camp as the army was going out to its battle positions, shouting the war cry. ²¹ Israel and the Philistines were drawing up their lines facing each other. ²² David left his things with the keeper of supplies, ran to the battle lines and asked his brothers how they were. ²³ As he was talking with them, Goliath, the Philistine champion from Gath, stepped out from his lines and shouted his usual defiance, and David heard it. ²⁴ Whenever the Israelites saw the man, they all fled from him in great fear.

²⁵ Now the Israelites had been saying, “Do you see how this man keeps coming out? He comes out to defy Israel. The king will give great wealth to the man who kills him. He will also give him his daughter in marriage and will exempt his family from taxes in Israel.”

²⁶ David asked the men standing near him, “What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”

²⁷ They repeated to him what they had been saying and told him, “This is what will be done for the man who kills him.”

²⁸ When Eliab, David’s oldest brother, heard him speaking with the men, he burned with anger at him and asked, “Why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the wilderness? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle.”

²⁹ “Now what have I done?” said David. “Can’t I even speak?” ³⁰ He then turned away to someone else and brought up the same matter, and the men answered him as before.

³¹ What David said was overheard and reported to Saul, and Saul sent for him.

³² David said to Saul, “Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him.”

³³ Saul replied, “You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth.”

³⁴ But David said to Saul, “Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, ³⁵ I went after it, struck it and

rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. ³⁶ Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. ³⁷ The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.”

Saul said to David, “Go, and the Lord be with you.”

³⁸ Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. ³⁹ David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them.

“I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I am not used to them.” So he took them off. ⁴⁰ Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

⁴¹ Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him, kept coming closer to David. ⁴² He looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy, glowing with health and handsome, and he despised him. ⁴³ He said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?” And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. ⁴⁴ “Come here,” he said, “and I’ll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!”

⁴⁵ David said to the Philistine, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. ⁴⁶ This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. ⁴⁷ All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.”

⁴⁸ As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. ⁴⁹ Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground.

⁵⁰ So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him.

⁵¹ David ran and stood over him. He took hold of the Philistine’s sword and drew it from the sheath. After he killed him, he cut off his head with the sword.

When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they turned and ran. ⁵² Then the men of Israel and Judah surged forward with a shout and pursued the Philistines to the

entrance of Gath and to the gates of Ekron. Their dead were strewn along the Shaaraim road to Gath and Ekron. ⁵³ When the Israelites returned from chasing the Philistines, they plundered their camp.

⁵⁴ David took the Philistine's head and brought it to Jerusalem; he put the Philistine's weapons in his own tent.

⁵⁵ As Saul watched David going out to meet the Philistine, he said to Abner, commander of the army, "Abner, whose son is that young man?"

Abner replied, "As surely as you live, Your Majesty, I don't know."

⁵⁶ The king said, "Find out whose son this young man is."

⁵⁷ As soon as David returned from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with David still holding the Philistine's head.

⁵⁸ "Whose son are you, young man?" Saul asked him.

David said, "I am the son of your servant Jesse of Bethlehem."

Challenge for the Day: Do something that you loved to do as a kid. Have fun with this one! What'd you do today? Let us know at www.redletterchallenge.com.

34

“Go therefore and make disciples”

Matthew 28:18

Following Jesus is not a sacrifice, it is the greatest opportunity we will ever have!

The disciples understood this and that was why they were able to jump out of the boat or immediately leave their trades and follow after Jesus.

All Jesus said was “Follow Me” and they left everything and followed. Why was it so easy? I don’t think we understand just how special it is to be a disciple of Jesus. My definition and the way I thought of a disciple truly changed a few years ago when I was studying some of Ray Vanderlaan’s work entitled “Dust of the Rabbi.” Much of this devotion that follows comes from his teachings.⁴⁷

To understand what a disciple is one must go back to the land and the people and the day that Jesus was born into. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in Judea, which was in Israel. And you should know that Israel had a deep desire and passion for what is called the Torah. Torah is the Hebrew word meaning law, instruction, or way, and it specifically referred to the Old Testament, especially the first five books: Genesis through Deuteronomy. The people of Israel knew the Torah. It’s what they lived for! Jesus was born into this group of people. And the people that were most highly regarded and respected in Israel, since they had such a passion for the Torah were those who taught the Torah. They were known as Rabbi’s. And I’m going to argue that to understand Jesus, if you truly want to understand Him at his core, you must understand this: Jesus was a Rabbi. A Rabbi was more than just a teacher of the Torah though. It was a highly respected position, a profession with standards and accountability. Rabbi’s were also called Masters. Jesus was referred to as a Rabbi 14 times in the New Testament and 40 times a teacher.

Vanderlaan says that, “For a young boy growing up in Israel, to be a Rabbi was the greatest thing that could happen to you.” And you know what the second greatest thing would have been: to be a disciple, a follower of a Rabbi. If being a Rabbi was a huge deal, then following the Rabbi was an amazing opportunity, especially following Rabbi Jesus. There was something special about Rabbi Jesus. Not only did He teach the Torah with full understanding and with great interpretation, but He went way beyond this. He spoke with authority even over the wind and the waves. He began to heal many people and defy all sorts of laws of nature. Word of His power spread, because there had never been a Rabbi like Jesus. Becoming a disciple was what every young Jewish boy in Israel desired and strived to become, so imagine not just following a Rabbi, but following the greatest Rabbi that had ever lived. Imagine how exciting that must have been to become one of His disciples. What blows me away more than anything else, though, is what it took to become a disciple of a Rabbi in the day that Jesus lived.

There was this quote from a Rabbi in Jesus' day: "Under the age of six we do not receive a child. But from six upwards, we accept him and stuff him with Torah like an ox." They crammed as much Torah into the kid as they could. It was around the age of six that a little boy would begin to go to what is called **Bet Sefer**. Bet Sefer means the house of the book, and the book was Torah. From the age of six till about ten, a little boy would literally sit at the feet of a teacher. And from dawn until afternoon, they would memorize Torah. They would chant Torah. When we were in kindergarten through fifth grade, it wasn't really that hard: we learned how to read, how to count, we got to take naps, had snack time, and my favorite of all: recess. But not for these boys. Memorizing the Torah... that's what they did. And by the time they were 10 years old, the young Jewish boy would have all of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy memorized word-for-word.

By about the age of 10, most of them would be done, and they'd go back home and learn the family trade. There would be some students, however, who had a love and a passion for learning and memorizing the Torah. They had a special gift, and they'd be accepted to move on to the next level. At the age of 10, they would go to what was called **Bet Talmud**, which was the house of learning. That was the best. And that would last till they were about 14 years old. And they would keep memorizing, these young boys, day after day, year after year. And by the age of 14, it wasn't uncommon for these students to have the entire Hebrew Scripture memorized...that's Genesis through Malachi...1087 pages in my book with size 6-font memorized word-for-word. And their Rabbis, their teachers, would then ask them questions of understanding. For these disciples it wasn't just knowing what was in the text, but they had to be able to interpret it as well. It had to be a part of their life.

Ray Vanderlaan, an American New Testament scholar, studied in Israel with a group of Rabbinical students. He said that there were 22 students in the class and that he was the only one of all 22 that did not have the Old Testament memorized from Genesis to Malachi. That's in our day. They love Torah. And that's what they devoted themselves to and still devote themselves to today.

At the age of 14 or 15 then, the best of the best from Bet Talmud would want to go on, so they would find a Rabbi that they admired, and they would ask, Could I be one of your talmidim (students)? The Rabbi would then give them a test. If they passed it, he would accept them as one of his talmidim. They would go into what was called the **Bet Midrash**, which means the house of study.

And so you see, a typical Rabbi would never recruit. Students would come to them and beg them, "Can I get in?" And the Rabbis would ask, to test: "Do you know the Torah? Have you memorized the whole thing? And are you able to interpret it rightly?" And if the kid was good enough, they'd say yes, but usually not. Usually the Rabbi would say no. This is when the students, if the Rabbi accepted them, would get to follow so closely to

their Rabbi. They would spend every waking minute with their Rabbi so that they could always learn from him. This is what it took to become a disciple back then! Only the best of the best made it.

But we know from Scripture, bringing it back to Rabbi Jesus now, that the disciples Jesus chose weren't the best of the best. He didn't wait for others to come up to Him and ask to follow Him. Instead, He went to a person that lived for more money: a tax collector named Matthew. He went to guys who didn't make it through Rabbi School, some unschooled and ordinary men like Peter, Andrew, James, and John, people who were fishing with their family, doing the family trade. These people didn't deserve to follow after the greatest Rabbi ever! Jesus came to them, a group that was most likely young adults or the age of college students, and said, "Come, follow me." I've always wondered why it was so easy for these disciples to just jump up and follow after Jesus. But I get it now. These guys were used to failing. They were used to being told, "You're not good enough." Can you imagine what a privilege and an honor and how excited they were to get the call from Jesus to come and follow Him? The greatest opportunity of their life just came upon them...of course they would follow after Him. He was giving them a second chance.

Jesus offers us the same chance today. There is forgiveness and mercy for everything that you've ever done. God wants you to be His disciple today. He's calling, walking along the shore right now calling to you, "Follow Me." What are you going to do?

There's a great prayer that goes back to Jesus' day, and it was a blessing that was given to talmidim from their Rabbis, and it was this: "**May you be covered by the dust of your Rabbi.**" In other words, May you follow so closely with your Rabbi (because they lived in a dusty world), that when His feet kicked up dust, you were so close to Him that His dust would cover you. May you never be out of His sight. May you never be some place where you can't hear Him speak to you.

Do you want to go and make disciples? Live in the dust of Jesus. It'll happen.

Bible for the Day: Luke 5:1-11 and Luke 5:27-32: Here we have the stories of Jesus calling some of His disciples. What an honor and privilege they were chosen by Rabbi Jesus!

Luke 5:1-11

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. ² He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. ³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”

⁵ Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

⁶ When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. ⁷ So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

⁸ When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” ⁹ For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, ¹⁰ and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.” ¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

Luke 5:27-32

²⁷ After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, ²⁸ and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

²⁹ Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. ³⁰ But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

³¹ Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ³² I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Challenge for the Day: It is imperative that you become a disciple, or follower, of Jesus. If you aren’t already, can you identify one or two people who you feel like are mature disciples of Jesus and ask them to mentor you? If you are already following after Jesus, you could find a couple of people that you could mentor. Post on how your experience went and if you have any good discipleship material that you’ve found or used please post it to our site at www.redletterchallenge.com.

35

“I was in prison and you visited me”

Matthew 25:36

Some believe that once you become a Christian everything will go great. In fact, that's what a lot of preachers proclaim from their pulpit. But the Bible I read tells me that after professing Christ there will be persecution, tough times, and struggles. Yes, there are good times too. Even in the midst of the difficult times we face as Christian, there is joy and hope and peace. But clearly, as Christians, there are times where we should expect that things will be difficult.

It's sometimes hard for us as Americans to remember that there are still many suffering for their faith as we speak. There is a website from the organization called “Voice of the Martyrs” where you can see all of the areas where Christians are still persecuted today.⁴⁸

Matthew 5:10 says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” John the Baptist was imprisoned in the Gospels. Jesus was murdered in the Gospels. Peter, Paul, and Silas all spent time in prison in the book of Acts. Persecution is a normal, expected thing for followers of Jesus. I love that when Paul and Silas were in the midst of being persecuted and thrown in jail, Acts 16:25 tells us that they were singing hymns and praying to God! The other prisoners were listening to them and it made such an impression on the jailer that he actually came to faith in Jesus! Just after Jesus tells us that we are blessed if we are persecuted on His account, he says in our attitude we are to “rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.” (Matthew 5:12). It's amazing that in the midst of persecution we can actually rejoice and be glad! Only the power of the Holy Spirit can allow us to be able to do this!

There are a few things we can think of today when it comes to our topic:

- Remember to pray for those who are persecuted
- If you are being persecuted, remember that you have a reward in heaven. You can rejoice and be glad even in the midst of it!
- If you are not and have never been persecuted for your faith, you need to ask yourself if you are truly living the life God is wanting and calling you to live. If not, what needs to change?

Bible for the Day: 2 Corinthians 11:23-29: This is the section where we hear all of the hardship and persecution that the Apostle Paul went through.

²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been

constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

Challenge for the Day: Odds are most of us aren't able to just visit a prisoner today. Something you can do is write a letter to someone who is in jail because of their faith. Go to <http://www.prisoneralert.com/>, a ministry of Voice of the Martyrs, to create a letter and send it to a Christian who is imprisoned. How did today go? Comment at www.redletterchallenge.com.

36

“Sell all that you possess and give to the poor”

Mark 10:21

America makes up less than 5% of the world’s population yet controls 20% of the world’s wealth.

One billion people in the world do not have access to clean water, while the average American uses 400-600 liters of water a day.

Every 7 seconds, somewhere in the world a child under age five dies of hunger, while Americans throw away 14% of the food we purchase.

40% of people in the world lack basic sanitation, while 49 million diapers are used and thrown away in America every day.

Americans spend more annually on trash bags than nearly half of the world does on all goods.⁴⁹

The one that most shocks me above is the amount we spend on trash bags, just to throw away our stuff! With all of those statistics being true, the reality is that there are still millions of people in our country who are poor and who are really struggling. The more we dig into the words of Jesus and His action statements in the Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the more we see how much followers of Jesus are meant to be givers! But this one kicks it up to a level that we haven’t seen yet. This one has got to be the hardest of all of the quotes we’ve looked at in the past 36 days.

It’s hard because money, possessions, and the kingdoms that we create for ourselves in this world are hard to let go of. For many of us, money is our first love. It has our heart. Jesus knew this and even mentions it. He says “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”⁵⁰ Later He calls us to love our God with all our hearts. So if A=B and B=C, then what God is asking us to do is to love Him with all of our money! Jesus knows that if He has your money He has your heart!

Whatever you invest in financially you find yourself being emotionally connected to that as well. If you give money to a university, you will monitor how that university is doing. If you are a member of a country club, you will make sure they are doing the right things to keep the golf course in great shape. I am a part of a Homeowner’s Association and because I pay dues to that every month I expect others to keep their houses and yards up to the level that we keep ours at. When you invest in something financially, you invest in it emotionally too.

Jesus is telling you to invest in Him. Give to His kingdom. Give to the church. Give to people that need help. Give to organizations that are meeting needs in the community.

I believe God is asking us to give until it hurts until it feels good!

Giving has to hurt. In other words, it has to be a sacrifice. I know some people who give 10%, but that's not a sacrifice at all. They believe that because they are tithing they are doing what God is wanting them to do. Listen, if you make \$1 million a year and you are giving \$100,000 to church that \$100,000 makes a huge difference to the church, but it's not a sacrifice for you to live on \$900,000 a year. The sacrifice would be to give \$900,000 and live on \$100,000, something of which can easily still be done while enjoying a nice lifestyle!

The more you start giving the easier it gets. It hurts to sacrifice at first, but if you keep giving and sacrificing, it begins to feel really good! The closest thing I can equate it to is with exercising and working out. If you haven't worked out for a while and then all of a sudden go in and lift weights, you will be very sore, especially if you push yourself hard while you are there. But you will walk around and tell yourself and others, "This is a good pain, even if it really hurts." Somehow in the midst of the pain you are experiencing, it also for some strange reason feels good at the same time. Then you work out again and you feel less pain. And then the next time, even less pain. This pattern continues until you work out and experience no pain at all.

The same is true of giving. To follow after God faithfully means following after Him with everything that you have and this includes your money and your possessions. He wants you to be a giving person. If you haven't given in a while or if you've given a certain percentage but that percentage wasn't requiring you to sacrifice at all, then giving what God actually wants you to give will hurt. But it feels good at the same time. Then you give again, and it hurts less. And again, and there's even less hurt. Until all of the sudden you are giving and it doesn't even hurt at all!

Today's quotation is so hard and so shocking that it forces us to ask the question: How serious is Jesus here? Does he really want us to sell everything and give it to the poor? What is everything? Like *everything everything*? Am I giving until it hurts until it feels good?

Bible for the Day: Mark 10:17-27: This is the story where we see the rest of the context behind Jesus' quote.

¹⁷ *As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

¹⁸ *"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall*

not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

²⁰ “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

²¹ Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²² At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³ Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

²⁴ The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

²⁶ The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

Challenge for the Day: Give sacrificially today. Pray about where to give and how to give it but act in faith today. How did it go today? Share online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

37

“Be merciful”

Luke 6:36

Today, Jesus asks us to be merciful as the Father is merciful towards us. We are not really in a culture where we practice mercy very often. The definition of mercy is, “Compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm.”⁵¹ But, if we are honest, a lot of times we don’t like to show compassion or forgiveness, but rather, revenge.

We crave revenge, fairness, equality. We kind of like the theories, “eye for an eye” and “tooth for a tooth.” If you look at the TV shows or movies we watch, revenge is all over the place! In fact, not long ago there was a new show on television called “Revenge.” The summary of the show says that it centers on a young woman who is welcomed into a community filled with people who don’t know she’s only there to exact revenge on those who had destroyed her family. Her whole life is about revenge. Countless movies are all about revenge: Count of MonteCristo, Karate Kid, Gladiator, the Break-Up, Mean Girls, Payback, Kill Bill, Man on Fire, Taken, etc.

There are two approaches to revenge in our day:

1) Direct Approach: The direct approach is: “You do something bad to me, I’ll do something bad to you.” If you do something bad to me, I will just punch you in the face, I will shoot you, I will impale you, or if it’s a really good movie all of the above.

2) Indirect Approach: The indirect approach is: “You do something bad to me, I’m going to live my life so well that in comparison to me, people will laugh at you.” You see this sort of revenge enacted often at high school reunions. Someone made fun of you or bullied you at high school, and now, you want to come back at the reunion and show them how much greater you are now.

But we have a God who doesn’t work according to the lifestyle and ways that we work. He forgives time and time again, and calls all of His disciples to do the same. He forgives us every time we come to Him. There is endless mercy for us in Jesus.

Often I hear the words grace and mercy used synonymously with one another. They are close but they are not identical. To receive grace is to receive a gift that you do not deserve. To receive mercy is to not receive something you do deserve. I’ve heard the word grace called, “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” Grace is the eternal life we have with God despite the fact that we have not earned it by our own works. It’s a free gift and we don’t deserve it. So in essence the gift of grace from God results in heaven for those that believe.

Mercy, on the other hand, is not having to endure the punishment we all deserve. We have all messed up and fallen short of God's glory, according to Romans 3:23, and deserve death and the consequences of Hell. God had every right to punish us or harm us. He had every right to throw us where we belong, but instead He had mercy on us. If grace means heaven, mercy means "not hell." Another example of mercy would be if I break the law or am caught speeding and the police officer doesn't hold me to it. He has mercy on me and forgives me of my ticket.

I'm thankful we have a God who is not vengeful, but instead is full of mercy. It's only because of His mercy that we are saved from having to face the ultimate punishment in Hell. God now calls us to be like Him, to put whatever someone else deserves to the side, and instead practice mercy on them. It's through forgiveness and compassion that people come to know Jesus. May you be a person that brings that forgiveness and compassion to others in your life today!

Bible for the Day: Matthew 18:21-35 and Luke 23:32-43: The first story is a parable where God essentially is telling us the people in God's kingdom are a people who forgive, just like our God does. The second story is an individual example of how God forgives and has mercy on a criminal during his last breaths.

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."^[a]

²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold^[b] was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.^[c] He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Luke 23:32-43

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”^[a] And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.”

³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews.

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

⁴³ Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Challenge for the Day: Be intentional about showing mercy to someone today. Perhaps you can let someone off the hook if they owe you a favor or some cash. If you don't have the opportunity today, be on the lookout for who and how to give mercy to someone at some point this week. What did you do? Was it easy or hard? Let us know at www.redletterchallenge.com.

38

“It is better to give than receive”

Acts 20:35

Which is really better: to give or receive?

I'll be honest with you, when I was younger I thought it was much better to get things than to give things. At Christmas, I loved getting things, and really didn't care what others got. But somehow in my old age now, my thinking has changed. Now I get much more satisfaction in giving a gift than in receiving a gift. When I buy a gift for someone I truly care about, it's so hard to keep it from them.

My wife and I got married in 2004 and in December of that year we moved away from many friends we had met in college in Wisconsin to Seminary in Missouri. In Missouri, at the time, we had no real friends there and we were both several hundred miles away from our families. When you grow up in your families, you create certain traditions. My family tradition was that we would stay up late on Christmas Eve and open gifts after my dad got home from all of the Christmas Eve services. Because he was pastor of a large church, there were multiple worship services and the last one didn't start until 11PM, which means dad didn't get home until about 1AM. Then we would open presents! I loved and cherished those moments.

So here my wife and I were, just moved to Missouri with no friends and family, right around Christmas time. I had bought her this pair of shoes that I knew she really wanted and she had also bought me a golf club that I really wanted. We were both so excited to give each other the gifts we had bought. And since we weren't constricted to our old traditions anymore, we decided we couldn't wait any longer, and our first Christmas together we opened our gifts for each other on December 11th! The next year we did a little better; we made it until December 13th. Now we have kids, so we're back to a normal Christmas Eve gift opening, you know, because we have to be responsible adults now.

But here's the point in all of this: when you have a good gift for someone you care about, you can't wait to give it away.

Jordan Grafman actually asked the question, “Is it better to give or to receive?” “He asked nineteen fit volunteers to participate in a computer game while having their brains scanned by an fMRI. An fMRI is a machine that scans the brain that measures increased blood flow to the different blood vessels that accompany brain usage. And through scanning the brain, they were actually able to tell in this game whether people got more excited about giving or receiving a gift. The way the game was played was it gave out

cash rewards for doing well and offered the contestants a chance to either receive the reward or to donate and to give the reward to someone else. The team of scientists found that giving a present to another being actually feels better than receiving a gift from one.”⁵²

We have all been given the most amazing gift in the entire world by receiving the grace of Jesus Christ in our life. As amazing as it is to receive this gift, it is even better when after we receive it, if we can give that gift to others. Anytime I’ve ever gotten a gift I really like I love to tell others about it. I’m sure you are the same way too! Why is it, then, that sometimes we fail to give people the greatest gift they could ever have, want, or need?

The best thing you can do with a good gift is rip it open, enjoy it, and share it with others.⁵³ I hope you think about this for your life. Are you sharing the greatest gift that you’ve ever been given with someone else right now? If not, why not? If you are, isn’t it amazing?

Bible for the Day: Acts 4:32-37 and 2 Corinthians 8:1-10: The first section of Scripture talks about how the first church shared all that they had with one another. They understood what it meant to give to one another. The second section mentions how excited the churches in Macedonia were to give even in the midst of their poverty. Pay special attention to the last verse as well, as this is where all of our generosity stems from.

Acts 4:32-37

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

2 Corinthians 8:1-10:

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. ⁵ And

they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. ⁶ So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Challenge for the Day:

Community Events. Click on your location for more details.

Put in links for events for Mount Dora, Lake Mary, and Casselberry

If you are unable to participate in the community event, here's your challenge. Give a gift today to a worthy person or charity. What gift did you give? How did you feel in giving it away? Tell us at www.redletterchallenge.com.

39

“If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant to all”

Mark 9:35

Put yourself in my shoes. You're on a 5th grade retreat at church with some of your friends. Dinner's over and dessert time is just around the corner. You know that for dessert tonight it's going to be ice cream sandwiches, something of which you just love with a passion. In order to avoid total chaos and disaster, the youth pastor suggests that everyone come up alphabetically one-by-one in order to get their ice cream sandwich. This doesn't really sound fun or fair to you since your last name starts with a "Z." So finally, after Thomson, Weber, and Younghouse get their ice cream sandwiches, it's your turn "Zehnder." Up you go to get your ice cream sandwich from the lady on the other side of the counter who looks at you and says as nicely as she can, "I'm sorry, but we just ran out. Looks like we were one short." Oh, the heartbreak. Can't you feel it? Isn't it rough being in my shoes?

Stay in them, because the next night you again hear the rumors that they brought back the ice cream sandwiches for dessert again! Finally, I'll get my ice cream sandwich and all peace on Earth can be restored again! In fact, I'm going to ask for two tonight since I got ripped off yesterday. So, again in order to maintain a little peace at the campsite, the youth pastor lines everyone up, but this time to be fair, he switches it so that we don't line up alphabetically by last name, but instead by first name. Oh, great! Again, back of the line. As you're waiting in line craving the ice cream sandwiches, you start to get really angry at your parents. "Why in the world would they do this to me? Zach Zehnder? I'm at the end of the line every time. What did I do to deserve this?" So finally after Tom and Will get their desserts, it's your turn. You approach the same lady again holding out your hands and just as you are getting ready to ask for two, she says, "You again, Oh Zach, I'm so sorry but it looks like we're just one short again. Next year I'll make a request to get more." Next year? I won't even be here next year! No one who is reading this knows what it's like to live as a Double Z. It's brutal! You get the last pick of everything, you get shafted on desserts, and chosen last on numerous occasions.

That's why this quotation of Jesus is my favorite of all! Because finally, I'll be first! I hope you know I'm kidding, sort of! Jesus is calling us to put ourselves last and not first. It's not at all what we hear in our world today though. We are taught to promote ourselves and to put our own needs first. We are taught to take care of ourselves and look out for "Number 1." But Jesus tells us the opposite. In His kingdom, the ones who are blessed are the ones who serve others and put others before themselves.

Time and time again, Jesus talks about being a servant, practicing humility, being meek, and doing things for others. We read these verses earlier in the challenge, but they are

said so beautifully that we'll take another look at them. These verses show us what it means to be a servant and to put others before ourselves and how in the end God will be exalted by all people! Philippians 2:5-11 says,

⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Bible for the Day: Mark 9:33-37: Here is the context of Jesus' quote today.

³³ *They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"* ³⁴ *But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.*

³⁵ *Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."*

³⁶ *He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them,* ³⁷ *"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."*

Challenge for the Day: Find a way to put someone else's needs before yours today. What'd you do today? Let us know at www.redletterchallenge.com.

40

“True worshippers will worship in Spirit and truth”

John 4:23

Too many people these days believe that you can have a great relationship with God without the church, or without worshipping with a community. The author of Hebrews urges us against this way of thinking in 10:25: “Let us not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Can you have a relationship with God without worship and without a community of worshippers? Yes. But is that what God wants for you? No. When you are living the Christian life and putting Christ’s words into practice on a daily basis, you need the encouragement and the support of a community behind you. It’s nice to know that you are not alone. A church is there to support, encourage, and motivate you to be the person God has called you to be every day of the week, not just Sunday!

Today Jesus says “True worshippers will worship in Spirit and truth.” This means that our worship is led by the Holy Spirit and comes out of love for God from the Holy Spirit inside of us. It also means we are being truthful. We are not worshipping for show or for theatre. We don’t do it because we should be doing it, or because our mom tells us we need to. We believe what we are saying and so we back it up by the way that we live as well.

I hope that if you are not involved in a church that you will find one. It is so important that you get plugged into a place that is led by the Holy Spirit and the truth of Jesus and the Good News in which He brings! If you want to continue putting Jesus’ words into practice on Day 41 and beyond it’ll help a lot to have a church back you up!

Bible for the Day: Acts 2:

This describes the church in its very beginning when the Holy Spirit comes to them. Notice in their worship gathering they are led by the Spirit, a message is preached, people are baptized, and they begin walking together as a community. This is why church is here and in order to follow after Jesus the way that God wants you to, He has set up the church to do just this.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues^[a] as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,^[b] ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

Peter Addresses the Crowd

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ "In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

²¹ And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.'^[c]

²² "Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men,^[d] put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. ²⁵ David said about him:

*“I saw the Lord always before me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.*

*²⁶ Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest in hope,*

*²⁷ because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
you will not let your holy one see decay.*

*²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence.’^[e]*

²⁹ “Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. ³⁰ But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹ Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. ³² God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. ³³ Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. ³⁴ For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

*“The Lord said to my Lord:
“Sit at my right hand*

*³⁵ until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.”^[f]*

³⁶ “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

³⁸ Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

The Fellowship of the Believers

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in

common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Challenge for the Day:

Community Event happening today! Click on your location for more details.

Put links for Mount Dora, Lake Mary, and Casselberry.

Worship God today with a community of people. How did the last day of the challenge go and how has the challenge impacted you? Why do you love to worship God? Share online at www.redletterchallenge.com.

¹ James 2:20

² Schulz, Andrea. "Pray Big." *willdavisjr.com*. n.p. n.d. Web. 5 June 2013.

³ Foster, Richard J. *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. [San Francisco]: HarperCollins, 1992. Pg. 8.

⁴ Weber, Jeremy. "80% of Churchgoers Don't Read Bible Daily, LifeWay Survey Suggests." *christianitytoday.com*. n.p. 7 September 2012. Web. 14 June 2013

⁵ Aubrey, Allison. "The Average American Ate (Literally) A Ton This Year." *npr.org*. n.p. 31 December 2011. Web. 4 April 2013.

⁶ Gillam, Carey, & Grebler, Dan, ed. "Food Waste: Americans Throw Away Nearly Half Their Food, \$165 Billion Annually, Study Says." *huffingtonpost.com*. n.p. 21 August 2012. Web. 17 May 2013.

⁷ Matthew 25:35-40

⁸ "A Rich Man Goes to Heaven." *whosoever.org*. n.p. n.d. Web. 15 April 2012.

⁹ Luke 23:34

¹⁰ Acts 7:60

¹¹ Willard, Dallas. *The Great Omission*. [San Francisco]: HarperCollins, 2006. Pg. 38.

¹² Exodus 16:29

¹³ Exodus 31:13-14, ESV

¹⁴ Stevenson, John. Sabbath Controversies. *angelfire.com/nt/theology*. n.p. n.d. Web. 15 July 2013.

¹⁵ "How do you Re-salt the Salt." *sermons.logos.com*. n.p. 1 October 2006. Web. 5 June 2012.

¹⁶ Smith, Vicki. "Veteran snake-handling pastor dies after bite." *news.yahoo.com*. n.p. 31 May 2012. Web. 4 June 2012.

¹⁷ Matthew 23:27-28

¹⁸ Mark 10:46-52

¹⁹ Willard, Dallas. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998. Pg. 116.

²⁰ Willard, Dallas & Giles, Keith. "The Gospel of the Kingdom." *dwillard.org*. n.p. 5 May 2010. Web. 5 Jun 2012.

²¹ Cabrera, Derek. "A family that eats together." *thinknation.org*. n.p. 2 April 2013. Web. 2 July 2013.

²² Paul Copan. *True for You, But not for Me*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1998) p.32-33. cites D.A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 1978), page 97.

²³ Waller, Daniel. The Relationship Principles of Jesus IV. *sermons.logos.org*., n.p., 14 April 2012. Web. 14 June 2013.

²⁴ Matthew 7:3

²⁵ Sagal, Peter. Wait, Wait, the Moth and Theatre and Mother Theresa. *Weplaydifferent.wordpress.com*. n.p. 20 Jan 2012. Web. 5 May 2012.

²⁶ Stanley, Andy. *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012. Pg. 125.

²⁷ Keller, Timothy J. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Dutton, 2008. 36.

- ²⁸ Manning, Brennan. *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. Sisters, Or.: Multnomah, 2000. 149.
- ²⁹ Luther, Martin. *Vol. 43. Luther's Works: Devotional Writings II* (J.J. Pelika, H.C. Oswald & H.T. Lehmann, ed.). Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1999, c1968. Pgs. 210-211.
- ³⁰ Luther, Martin. *A Simple Way to Pray*. (1535; AE 43:200), cited in Arand "Battle Cry," 42.
- ³¹ Definition of worship. *thefreedictionary.com*. n.p. n.d. Web. 11 May 2012.
- ³² Best, Harold M. *Music through the Eyes of Faith*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993. Pg. 147.
- ³³ Worship quotes. *cuttingitstraight.co.uk*. n.p. n.d. Web. 4 January 2012.
- ³⁴ Zahnd, Brian. *Unconditional? The Call of Jesus to Radical Forgiveness*. (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2010. Pg.18.
- ³⁵ Wiesenthal, Simon. *The Sunflower* (New York: Schocken, 1997). Pgs. 14-15.
- ³⁶ Zahnd, Brian. *Unconditional? The Call of Jesus to Radical Forgiveness*. (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2010. Pgs. 7-12.
- ³⁷ Matthew 18:21-22
- ³⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:5
- ³⁹ Levitt, Stephen D., and Stephen J. Dubner. *Super Freakonomics*. N.p.: HarperCollins Canada, Limited, 2009. Pgs. 121-122.
- ⁴⁰ Patrick, Darrin, Matt Carter, and Joel Lindsey. *For the City: Proclaiming and Living out the Gospel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010. Pgs. 15-23.
- ⁴¹ Ireland, Michael. New Study Finds even Pastors are 'Too Busy for God'. Christianity.org. n.p. 7 August 2007. Web. 1 May 2012.
- ⁴² Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988. Pg. 160.
- ⁴³ *Bucketlist.org*.

⁴⁴ Matthew 18:3

⁴⁵ To be Six Again. *Poeticexpressions.co.uk*. n.p. n.d. Web. 3 April 2012.

⁴⁶ 1 Timothy 4:12

⁴⁷ You can find Ray Vander Laan's teaching at the website *followtherabbi.com*. This website is a great resource to understand how things were in the times in which Jesus lived and walked. It brings a lot of life to some of the stories and parables that Jesus teaches when you understand the context of where it came from.

⁴⁸ *www.persecution.com*.

⁴⁹ (Statistics above taken from Rob Bell's book *Jesus Wants to Save Christians; footnote it properly*).

⁵⁰ Luke 11:23

⁵¹ Definition of mercy. *Oxforddictionaries.com*. n.p. n.d. Web. 7 February 2012.

⁵² Fernandez, Alvaro. 'Tis better to give than receive': oxytocin and dopamine. *Sharpbrains.com*. n.p. 21 Mar 2007. Web. 14 Mar 2009.

⁵³ Dibs to Ben Hoyer on this quote. Ben is a great pastor and friend and many of his thoughts are echoed in my own words in this book.