Please feel free to use as much as you would like from these sermon manuscripts. My goal in a sermon is to shoot for 35 minutes so you can modify accordingly. Without further ado…

**RLC Week 1 Introduction**

Welcome to the Red Letter Challenge. Who’s excited?

These next 40 days have the opportunity to be the greatest impact our church has ever had on this community. It has the opportunity for you to grow in your faith and stretch you out of your comfort zone more than ever.

Have you ever had really good intentions but totally messed up? (Tell your own story…here’s mine)

A few months back me and a few guys from the church went to California to talk to a company, the same design company that did my workbook, about church architecture/design, etc. One of the guys on the trip was Dave Strem, our director of Ops. Some of you know Dave really well, some not so well, but Dave is from California, he loves it there, so it was really neat to see Dave light up in his home state. Not literally, figuratively light up. And let me tell you, you learn a lot about someone when you travel with them. I learned that there is no human on earth that likes pastrami more than Dave Strem. We went to this restaurant called the Hat and Dave ordered so much pastrami that he literally ate it for 6 meals in a row and took it on the plane with him. Instead of Dave Strem, we started calling him Dave Pastremi. Dave is one of those travelers that he likes to have an itinerary. He had every moment of this trip figured out. Yes, we had work to do, but outside of the work every hour was filled with activities, beach volleyball at Huntington Beach, a car museum, a couple of key restaurants to hit, a Dodgers baseball game in L.A. And the last stop on the list was Tito’s Tacos.

We would have just enough time right before our plane ride home. I think this was the only place Dave hadn’t been before but we heard quite a buzz about Tito’s Tacos. It’s very well-known out there. In fact, someone from our congregation is the one that told us “You have to go there when you are out there.” It’s only about 15 minutes away from LAX and so we were going to hit it up right before we flew back. Turns out traffic was a little worse than we thought and so we were kind of in a hurry, but thought we could still squeeze in some Tito’s. So we plugged it into our GPS and followed all the directions until it told us we had arrived at our destination. We needed to act quick so we didn’t miss our flight. So we go in and we order from the menu, but for whatever reason it just didn’t feel right. We ordered our food, gave him the credit card. He snatched it out of my hand, and right before he swiped it I asked the man behind the counter, is this “Tito’s Tacos.”

He acted like he didn’t understand me as he swiped my credit card and whispered something to what looked like his underage son. I don’t translate Spanish well but I can guarantee you what he said to his son had the word idiot and sucker in it as they both looked right at me and laughed. Turns out we weren’t at Tito’s Tacos. We found out that we had barged into a place called Cinco De Mayo Tacos. After ordering at the counter, I went outside and I looked out and there about 25 feet away was Tito’s Tacos, with a line of people in front of it. Our building was almost empty. And it turns out, our food was okay, but it wasn’t Tito’s. Dave tried to talk us into how good the food was and how this was better than Tito’s but I knew he was just trying to make us feel better. And truthfully he probably wasn’t that bummed anyway because he had about 2 pounds of pastrami left in his suitcase.

The more I assessed the situation, I was kind of astonished. Cinco De Mayo Tacos had designed their building to look just like Tito’s Tacos. I mean the colors and the way it looked were so similar.

We were bummed. We thought we were going to get to eat Tito’s Tacos and it wasn’t even close. We were close and yet at the same time, we were so far away.

We had the right intentions but completely missed out on the opportunity.

As a follower of Jesus, I don’t want to settle for Cinco De Mayo Tacos when I can have Tito’s Tacos. You know what I’m talking about. I think way too often in our walk with God we settle for something that is second-rate when all the while God has so much for us. God has great plans for us.

As Christians, we are notorious for missing some of the things God has placed right in front of them. The Israelites had the message but still missed the Messiah. Peter, one of the 12 disciples, spend much time in God’s presence but completely missed God’s purpose. The Galatians had God’s gift but somehow missed God’s Grace.

And I believe this extends to us today. Many times as followers of Jesus we have good intentions but we are completely missing out on the opportunity Jesus has for us. Jesus gives us the opportunity to be His disciples, to be His workers.

In Matthew 9:37, **“Jesus said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.”**

There is work to be done and Jesus invites us to be those workers. So if we are His workers, how are we doing? How are we representing Jesus? We are miserably failing. Some of you would say that’s too harsh. Well, let’s see…

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

If you ask Jesus followers what they think of fellow Jesus followers you get a real mixed bag. Some say positive things, some say negative things. But the real test is what do the one’s we are trying to reach think, what do they say.

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

Your immediate reaction—like mine—is that this characterization is grossly unfair. Why don't these folks recognize all the good things we do, like helping prisoners and the less fortunate in third-world countries, why don’t they notice how the church, not any government system or organization is leading the charge with disaster relief in Hurricane Harvey and Hurricane Irma?

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

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

If Jesus is known for grace, which is getting a free gift you don’t deserve, and we are known for judgment, which is getting what you do deserve, we have miserably failed. By definition judgment and grace are opposites. We have missed the mark. If Jesus is known for unity and we are known for division, we’ve missed the mark. If Jesus is known for His good works and we are known for our hypocrisy we’ve missed the mark.

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

After all that Jesus has done for me, I’m not content with representing Jesus in the way we have been described. We are called to bring people close to Jesus by how we live, and somehow people are rejecting Christianity by the way that we live. I can’t live with that. I can’t live without giving everything that I possibly can towards changing the image we give of Jesus.

Knowing the grace that He’s won for me, knowing the grace that He’s given me, knowing how he’s changed my life. I cannot and will not just sit back and let this be the picture we show of Jesus. We won’t sit back, we will attack. **We don’t just want to change the story we tell of Jesus, we have to.**

But how? Because this is one of the main problems. As followers of Jesus we don’t know what to shoot for. Even Pastor Bill Hybels recognized this truth many years ago. Bill is the pastor of one of the largest churches in our country and has been a pastoral leader for much of his life. He did a massive survey/study and what he found is that churches, including his own, had gotten pretty good at drawing people in, they would call these people seekers, but they weren’t very effective in growing and maturing them spiritually.

**Churches could draw people in by offering therapeutic service that make them feel better, but not be better.** Hybels understands the problem. What the church needs to do is make disciples, to grow people in the faith, not be spectators.

But how? Because there is so much noise so what do we trust. How do you know what to shoot for?

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

Rifle shooters are trained to fire between heartbeats. They try to slow their heartbeat down as much as possible and fire in between those beats per minute. Medals are literally won by millimeters. Going into his final shot, Emmons was in first place by a mile and all he needed to do to win the gold was hit the target, which for many of us in this room wouldn’t be a problem, for the greatest shooter in the world, piece of cake! It’s a sport where top competitors are expected to be so accurate that we have a hard time believing they could actually miss.

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

<http://a.espncdn.com/media/oly/2004/0822/photo/a_emmons_frt.jpg>

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

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

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

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

We’ve been shooting at the wrong targets.

And there is so much noise out there for us to contend with. Even in our faith, there are so many answers for what it means to be a follower of Jesus. So how do we know what to trust and what to do? Even people that have been in the faith for decades still struggle with practically knowing what it means to follow Jesus on a daily basis. And so how do we fix this problem? How do we know what to aim for?

That’s when something so brilliant come to me. So brilliant I would actually say it was genius. And here’s the question:

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

I know what you are thinking: “That's the big idea?” Yes, that's it. And it wasn't even my idea! That's why I knew it was genius, because the Red Letter Challenge is all about me stealing Jesus’ words. It’s His idea. Yes, a lot of words in the RLC are written and organized by me, but everything in this book, the small groups, the sermons, everything that we do over the next 40+ days stems from what Jesus actually said. It turns out, in the greatest sermon ever preached, that Jesus gave us the key to following Him. And it’s twofold. Hear His words. And put them into practice. Check it out:

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

If you have read the Sermon on the Mount, you know it's rather difficult to understand. Jesus uses humor and sarcasm and introduces counter-cultural ideas. It amazed all who were in attendance. It still amazes us today.

But the thing that stuck out to me is that He closes this sermon with an illustration so simple that it reminds me of the children's story "The Three Little Pigs."

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

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

Jesus has called us to be his disciples. We get to represent Him. We have that opportunity. And I believe that **following after Jesus is not a burden, but the greatest single opportunity of our lives**. And the stakes are too high and too important for us to simply be going through the motions and not knowing if we are effective or not. So, welcome to the Red Letter Challenge, which very practically is a 40-day life-changing discipleship experience to put Jesus’ words into practice.

About 6 years ago, I started combing through the red letters of Jesus. I analyzed everything that He said, particularly when it came to what He is calling, commanding, and asking His followers to do. And it didn’t hit me until years later, but when I went back and looked at what He said again, what I found was that most of what Jesus asks His followers to do could be centered on 5 principles. And I believe these 5 principles are the targets that Jesus followers are called to shoot for.

He spent most of His time talking about these 5 principles:

1. **Being**: So many times Jesus talks about the importance of spending time and just being with Him. Before he invites us to do things for Him, through Him, in His name, he invites us into a relationship. Our relationship with Him will determine how effective we are at actually doing the things he asks.
2. **Forgiving:** Jesus is all about ‘dat grace. So many of us struggle with receiving God’s forgiveness, forgiving ourselves, or forgiving others. To truly represent Jesus in this world, we have a great understand of God’s grace in our lives and extend that grace to others.
3. **Serving:** After spending time being with Him, and receiving His forgiveness, now we are so motivated. After all that He’s done for me, I want to serve Him. I want to get out into the community, help those in need, love my neighbors, etc.
4. **Giving:** Jesus talked about the Kingdom of heaven more than anything else. A close second was money. I’ve found through the words of Jesus it’s impossible to be a stingy Christian. Jesus followers are generous.
5. **Going:** It’s no coincidence that many of Jesus’ last words in each of the Gospels and even the last command He says in the book of Acts centers on the fact that we as Jesus followers must not just be His hands and feet in the community, but also His mouthpiece. We are to go out there and tell the Good News that this same Jesus that has died on the cross for my sins and forgiven what I’ve done has done the same for everyone.

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

And so, over the next 40+ days, we are going to put them into practice. We are embarking on a journey where we are not just going to read the Word of God, but we’re going to put His words into practice. And this will be the result: **By putting God's words into practice, you will find the life God has made for you!** I’m excited to welcome you on this journey with me. Honestly, I feel like a bit of a tour guide over the next 6+ weeks. I want you to know that I’m going on the journey with you and as your tour guide, I want you to start well. I want this trip to be as great as possible. And before you go on any trip, you got to be prepared, you need to pack. And that’s what this week is all about. It’s about telling you where we are going on this journey.

But before I leave you for week 1, which we will start on Tuesday of this week, there’s two quick reminders that I think will make all the difference in how this challenge, this trip goes for you. And the first is this. Some of you, when you are issued a challenge, the first thing you think is, “Man, I’m going to try hard, I’m going to dominate, I’m going to win, I’m going to get it done.” You get competitive. I suffer from this as well. The temptation is to want to do so well and perform so well that you forget the actual reasoning behind this challenge is that not that you would win, or that you would do better than your spouse, or that you would put checkmarks by each of the days you complete, but that you would live more like Jesus.

And so as your tour guide, before we get this thing started I want to remind you two things, first: **invite Jesus into your Red Letter Challenge experience**. How foolish and how silly would we be if at the end of the challenge if we did really well at the challenge, but we didn’t actually invite Jesus into our life. For the next 6 weeks I want to ask you to invite Jesus into the challenge today.

There’s a real problem in this world, many people do not believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and God’s solution to the problem in the world is that the Word would become flesh. John 1:14 says, “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.” It says earlier in the chapter that the Word has always been, even from the very beginning. He became flesh not only to redeem us but to reveal to us His plan that we now can be the Word becoming flesh in our world today. We, as His followers, have the opportunity to bring the Word to flesh.

Whatever you do don’t fall into the trap of doing the words of Jesus without Jesus. First step before we even enter into the Red Letter Challenge is inviting Jesus to be a part of your life. Nobody does the words of Jesus better than Jesus and you need Him to do His words. Don’t make the vital mistake of being like Jesus without Jesus, without trusting Him, without inviting Him to come along on the journey. We’ll speak much more on this topic next week.

My second reminder to you is this: **invite others into your Red Letter Challenge experience**.

You are going to find that some things that Jesus asks you to do might be easier than you thought but I’ll tell you there are some difficult things as well. Some of the things he calls us to do are downright scary. And yes, you have God with you. You need His strength, but I guarantee you that if you try to put Jesus’s words into practice long enough you will need the support from others, from your church family.

Share your own story about how important family or friends have been in some way in your life…what follows is my story.

I’ve shared this before but I think it just so illustrates the need of family and support. It’s about my sister Charista and we had moved to the state of NE from TN. And in NE, there isn’t much going on for the sporting world. We have our NE Huskers and the state shuts down when they play. It’s unlike Florida who has so many different teams and there’s no real allegiance to their teams. Because there’s not much going on in the sporting world, some of the things that other states don’t really care about, the state of NE gets passionate about. And one of those things was the Omaha Racers, which 20+ years ago was in the Continental Basketball Association, which was like the minor league for the NBA. But Omaha loved their Racers, and we got tickets to a game and so we along with thousands others attended.

As we were walking in as a family, I noticed there was a kiddie slam dunk contest at halftime that day. And I was too old for it at the time, so without telling my sister, I signed her up for it. After we sat down, I told her I signed her up, but hey don’t worry, there’s thousands of people here, you won’t get picked.

And a few minutes before halftime the PA Announcer comes on and says, “Tonight, the contestants for the Kiddie Slam Dunk Contest are,” and I don’t remember the other two names, but it was like, “Bobby Smith” and “Tommy Thompson” and Charista Zehnder.” And Charista looks at me with eyes like I hate you right now and I’m so scared, I don’t know what to do. And I said, “Charista, don’t worry, I’ve got a plan and I know what you need to do to win.”

And so me and my friend Dave took her out into the hall, didn’t have a basketball and a hoop, but we had a trash can and a box of Kleenex. And we said, “Charista, we want to do a walkthrough here. WE want you to do what we do out here on the court out there in front of everyone else.” And here’s what I know, because I’m a boy, I know what those boys are going to do. They are going to go up to the hoop, and they’re going ot power slam because they’re a boy and Power, Power, that’s what they will do. And so here’s what you are going to do. You are going to take that ball, and when you get to the hoop, you are going to runa round the hoop, circle it, and then when you get back to the basket, you are going to reverse slam backhand overhand slam it and if you do this I guarantee you will do this. So we were out in the hall. Okay take the Kleenex box, go up to the trash can, run around it, and then reverse slam. Okay, we had it.

Competition starts, thousands of people. And I’m sitting over there, thinking, man I hope this works or my sister is going to hate me forever. And so the first kid comes up, Billy, and it looks like he and his family really loved McDonald’s if you know what I mean. He comes up, 7 years old, and just aw, power slam. And it’s great. And then Tommy comes up, and Aw, power slam, and crowd loves it. Nice applause.

And then little Charista comes up, much smaller than they are, and she’s dribbling and she can barely dribble but she’s doing it and as she gets to the hoop, she veers to the side and runs by it, and the crowd gasps, (Gasp sound), thinking that she missed the hoop, but she didn’t miss the hoop, she was doing what she had rehearsed in the hallway. She’s walked through it already. She knows what to do, and as she rounded the hoop, she reverse slam backhanded that thing. The crowd went nuts, they went wild.

And so afterward they did the hand over the head applause thing, and he put it over Billy, and I think his own family boo’d him, and then Tommy, I think he was crying at how eerily quiet it was, and then they held it over Charista, and the place went nuts. She easily won the prize. And I think I took it later from her because it was my idea this whole thing anyway.

And I haven’t always been a big brother, but I’m proud of that moment. There are times as a church family that we irritate each other and I did that in the beginning of the game with my sister. But there are also times when we are scared and we don’t know what to do. Christ asks us hard things. But we are here for each other and say, “I know you are scared. I am too. But come one. Let’s do this together. We can do this. And when we fail, we need those people to say, “No man, don’t give up. Come on, let’s keep going.”

We really are better together and every time I’ve set a goal or undergone a challenge, I always perform better when I have others that are a part of it. Think of this…if in the RLC we are urged to follow Jesus’ words and live more like Him, Jesus Himself had a team. If Jesus who is fully God, fully man surrounded himself with a team of people, how much more important for us.

We have 23 home groups, we can still sign up more today. If you want to lead, if you want to just attend, I urge you, sign up. I declare to you, you need this.

Invite Jesus. Invite others.

**To put Christ words into practice, you need the strength from Jesus and the support from others.**

So, welcome to the Red Letter Challenge! Listen to me, if you do this, if you are really try.

You will be led to spend more time with the God who loves you. You will forgive people you never thought you would be able to. (That person may even be yourself!) You will serve and sacrifice more than you ever have before. You will become a more generous person. You will become bolder and courageous in what you say and in how you live. And as you work on these 5 principles that come through in Jesus’ teaching, I guarantee you that your life will be more rewarding.

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

We will represent the real Jesus.

We will go out with good intentions and hit the right targets.

**RLC Week 2 Being**

Share your own story of something that you didn’t finish well or didn’t have the energy to complete…here’s mine.

In my middle school years, I loved basketball. And believe it or not I was actually really little. I went to a school with several hundred kids in my grade and I was the third tiniest boy in my grade. In basketball, it’s an advantage to be tall. So I was already working at a disadvantage and so I needed to work really hard. I really wanted to make the team that year so I wanted to gear up so that when the tryouts came I was coming in on fire. You know how when you have those tryouts and practices at the beginning they are really hard and difficult, especially if you are not in good shape. So this year I’m going into tryouts guns blazing, in shape, ready to go, so that there is every possible opportunity to make the team.

I remember the sports season right before basketball was cross-country. And I’m not a cross-country runner, I’m not a runner at all. I’ve never liked it. But I wanted to get in good shape so me and a couple of my friends signed up for it. And I started running, and I wasn’t very good and I was usually in the middle of the pack of the back third. But something came into me when I started running where all the sudden I wanted to win. I think it’s called being competitive. But anyway, I was thinking I don’t like being in the back third. I don’t want to be in the middle of the pack. I want to win. And so I had hardly even run before and I didn’t really practice. In fact, I kind of just goofed off during most practices and never really pushed myself that hard.

We were coming up on the last race of the year. It was at our rival middle school. I went to Millard North, this was at Millard South. And the night before the race, I had a dream, and felt like God had given me a very clear vision for how to run the race. I felt like God had given this to me…to win the race, all you need to do to win the race is run faster than everyone else. Just run faster. I thought, “that’s easy, why hasn’t anyone thought of this before?” Runners just must not be very smart. I didn’t tell anyone my strategy because I didn’t want my secret out. I didn’t even tell my coach. So my strategy that day was to run out of the gate as fast as I can and get in front of everyone else and then when I see the runners coming behind me I’ll just run faster and stay in front. Never let them pass. That’s the goal. That’s the strategy. Run as hard as I can and hold everyone off.

The gun goes off and I am blazing out of the gate. I’m sprinting and everyone else is jogging…I make an incredible lead on the rest of the pack and I can’t see anyone. I hear some in the crowd saying, “Who’s this new guy? Where’d he come from?” I’m a mile out and just completely dominating. Nobody around. But about ¼ mile after that it started getting harder for me. And the people behind me started gaining on me. But I kept running as hard as I could and about another ¼ mile after which was halfway through the 5K race, the runners started getting really close to me. And I thought, okay, this is what you dreamed about…you just have to run faster. But something happened. My legs and my breathing couldn’t match the great vision that God had given me. You probably know what’s going to happen next right? Turns out the vision wasn’t from God.

And I couldn’t hold them off any longer. All the runners started passing me one by one. Mile 1 I’m winning the race. Mile 2 and I’m literally dead last and now have a new goal. Do you want to know what it is? Don’t finish last. You don’t want to finish last.

But I had some work to do because I was really trailing off really quick. Turns out sprinting the first mile isn’t a great strategy if you have 2 miles left to go. I notice one guy that looked like he was also really struggling. So with just 1/10 of a mile to go I’ve got him in my crosshairs. I will not let him beat me. I’ve got the will to win. I run as fast as I can. He was really struggling and I end up passing him just at the end. And sure enough I finish 2nd to last. My mom and dad are there to congratulate me. Turns out later I found out the one kid that I beat actually suffered an asthma attack at the end of the race. But hey, don’t bring your excuses. We’ve all got strategies and hurdles and you should have had your asthma in check. No excuses.

And to finish the story, that year I missed basketball tryouts, no joke, because I cut the tip of my finger off with a scissors doing an extra credit project for geometry. Things didn’t pan out the way I wanted.

That’s when I gave up sports and focused on God, you’re welcome! Had I made the basketball team that year I probably would be in the NBA, hanging out with Lebron, but instead I’m here with you faith-filled, big-thinking followers of Jesus Christ. Haha…

It turns out that people are pretty good at starting things but not so good at finishing. In my race, I dominated at the start, but didn’t have the endurance, the stamina, and strength to finish.

According to Jon Acuff’s book called “Finish”, 92% of people don’t finish the goals or resolutions they set out for themselves. 92%. That’s depressing.

I lost the race. Honestly, the reason is because in a physical sport like running, I hadn’t spent much time physically running. I was going on my own strength, but honestly, I didn’t have much strength to go on. Yes, I believe that God gives me and you and everyone some natural ability, but honestly, we can never just rest on our natural ability. If I want to be a great runner, I need to run. A lot. If I want to be a great singer, I need to do lessons, practice, sing, train, you name it. If I want to be a great golfer, I need to work on my game. And there’s multiple aspects of the game of golf. I need to go to the driving range to work on my drivers, woods, irons, wedges. I need to get in the bunker to practice my sand game. I need to get around the green to work on my chipping and most importantly my putting. Putting is actually the most important part of the game.

We kicked off the RLC this past week and I don’t want you to start and fizzle out quickly. Today I want to teach you how to not just start, but finish as well. I can’t accept and won’t accept that 92% of us won’t complete this challenge. The stakes are way too high for us. We’ve said that after all that Jesus has done for us, after He’s lived, died, and risen from the dead to absolve the sins of the world, which includes my sin, and offers me eternal life, I want to be the absolute best representation of Him that I can be. Not out of obligation, but rather I’m just so compelled from His grace that I have no other choice but to go all-in for Him. He’s my Savior, He’s my Lord, and I can’t wait to represent Him in this world.

We identified the problem…that we don’t represent Christ well, and if you disagree with that, just read and hear what non-Christians (you know, the one’s we are trying to reach) describe Jesus followers like. We also identified that one of the major issues for us as Jesus followers is we don’t have clarity on what it looks like to follow Jesus. And that’s when we went back to the Red letters in the Bible, you know the words that Jesus spoke, and identified 5 main targets that we are going to shoot for. How many of you remember them? Let’s say them together:

Being, Forgiving, Serving, Giving, Going

So for each of the next 5 weeks we’re going to talk about one of those targets. And we start with being. And this is really, honestly, the one that everything else hinges on. Why? Because **our doing flows from our being.** Jesus is going to ask us to do a lot in this challenge, but before we do anything, we need to understand that Jesus does not invite us into a religion, a check the box if you got it done system, but He invites us into a relationship. Let me say that again. **Jesus invites us into a relationship, not a religion.**

As we embark on this challenge, I really see myself as your tour guide, and before you go on any trip, you need to know what to pack. You need to pack the right things. You look at the weather forecast, you think about your plans, and you pack accordingly. So, this Sunday is all about packing the right things so that we don’t start and fizzle. We want to finish.

**I can start strong on my own strength, but I can’t finish strong on my own strength.** And I’d rather finish strong than start strong. The answer to finishing strong is not to rely on your strength, but God’s strength and that happens with the first principle, our first target: Being.

One of the most elite sports in the world is rowing. You see a lot of the Ivy League schools have really strong rowing teams. The aim of the sport is very simple. The first group of rowers that cross the finish line win. It’s just like any other race: the strongest and the quickest will always win. However, there is one key difference in rowing to any other race. In most other sports the key to winning is keeping your eyes firmly fixed on the finish line. Rowing is different. None of the rowers are actually looking at the finish line. As a matter of fact, their backs are actually facing the finish line. The rowers are not focused on the finish line rather they are focused on a man sitting on the edge of the rowing boat called the cox. The Cox is literally like the conductor of the rowing boat. He alone has his eyes fixed on the finish line and on the other competitors. The key to winning the race in rowing comes down to the relationship between the rowers and the Cox. Typically, when rowing teams win a race it is the Cox that people will celebrate because he led his team to the finish line. Our walk with God is very much like being in a rowing boat. As we look to Christ and trust in Him He will lead us and guide us and equip us!

**Hebrews 12:1:2 says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith…”** We are called to run our race and we will finish our race when we keep our eyes on the Author and the finisher of our faith!

Looking at Jesus is the most productive thing we can do. As we look to Him, He will lead and guide our steps.

On several occasions, Jesus would give His disciples different ways to be with Him:

* **Abide in my Word: John 8:31**
* **Pray earnestly: Matthew 9:38**
* **Worship the Lord Your God: Luke 4:8**
* **Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest: Mark 6:31**
* **And when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face: Matthew 6:17**
* **Let us eat and celebrate: Luke 15:23** (Remembrance)
* **The Sabbath was made for man: Mark 2:27**

All of these are organized around the theme of being with Him. At the root of it all, Jesus wants us to be with Him. He wants us to spend time with Him. Because as his followers Jesus is going to ask us to do a lot of stuff for Him. But before you can do them, it’s important to know why you’re doing them – and who you are doing them for. I believe **truly following Jesus means both being with Jesus and doing the things He asks.**

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

If I tell my son, “Go clean your room,” he’s not going to come back a couple hours later and say, “Hey dad, I memorized what you said. You said, ‘*Go, clean your room.’*” And he’s not going to say, “Dad, I know ‘Go clean your room’ in Greek. ‘*Pao Katharos sas domatio.’*” At this point I’d be impressed, but that’s not going to fly! And he’s not going to say, “My friends and I are going to gather and study what it would look like *if* I went and cleaned my room.” No, none of that’s going to work. So why do we think this is going to work with Jesus?

Jesus said, “Why do you call me ‘Lord,’ and not do what I tell you to do?” Words without action were never acceptable to Jesus. Faith without action is dead. Clearly, there is a time to do.

On the flip side, there are others (like me!), who enjoy doing. In fact, when I’ve polled people in the past, usually it’s more than 90% of us that would rather do than be. We think just being is boring. It’s not productive and we want to get things done! Even in my life I try to pattern my workweek Monday through Friday by working 4 days and spending one off day. In the 4 workdays, to help me stay organized, I have 2 of those days that I usually will term “doing days” and two days that I will call “discipling days.” So on the doing days, it’s just me and my computer, getting stuff done. And I usually come home after those days feeling so accomplished. But on my discipling days which is usually filled with many meetings, pouring into the staff or leaders or doing some sort of counseling, I’ll come home and even though in my heart I know I did what I needed to do, I didn’t feel like I had a productive day and that can be hard for me. It’s easier for me to do than to disciple. It’s easier for me to do than to be.

Much of the reason I believe is because doing produces measurable results. We have an incredible desire to feel significant, to be productive, to make a difference. And when I spend my time doing, I am rewarded with immediate results and I can see my progress and my work. The problem with being is that the work and the progress that is happening is unseen for the most part. Taking time out of our busy lives to spend with Jesus requires a level of faith and trust that most of us just don’t always have the patience for. In many ways, this could be a trust problem. **If we cannot trust Him in the calm of His presence, we will never be able to trust Him in the pursuit of His purpose.**

But if we don’t spend time being, our doing won’t be as productive. If we don’t spend the time resting in God and learning from Him, we’ll quickly burn out and our activity will become more about us than about Christ. We’ll run a mile thinking we are way ahead but the second mile will be a disaster!

I remember when I was dating my future wife Allison. We went on a trip with her family to the Chicago Science Museum. Allison warned me her dad likes to take 20-minute naps every day, no matter what. Sure enough, he found a bench near one of the displays and curled up and he was out. His eyes were closed, he was snoring, there was drool dripping from his mouth onto the floor. Okay, I might be exaggerating that last part.

At this point in my relationship with Allison I was still trying to make a good impression on her family. Apparently they were all used to their dad sleeping in random places, but I was not, so I volunteered to stay with him. People walked by and gave him weird looks, and then they would look at me. I, of course, acted like I didn’t know the man. It was very awkward, but right at 20 minutes, he popped up, awake, and I acted like everything was great. I thought it was crazy.

But apparently there is some scientific evidence that says those who take naps during the day can actually be more productive. It doesn’t seem like slowing down in the middle of productive work hours would be helpful, but these naps re-energize them so they can get more done. But somehow, someway it rejuvenates and re-energizes them so that they can get more done. And I’m not talking like 3 hour naps, but power naps. Some of the most powerful people in the world have power naps every day. Listen to this list of people: Thomas Edison, Leonardo da Vinci, Winston Churchill, Eleanor Roosevelt, even the great Arnold Schwarzanegger has learned how to nap on Venice Beach so he could sleep and tan at the same time. Yogi Berra who is one of the most quoted sports figures of all time said “I usually take a two-hour nap from one to four.”

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

**Before we do what Christ asks us to do, we need to be with Him.**

This “being” really could be synonymous with spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are good habits that allow you to more closely connect to Jesus. These disciplines have been practiced for centuries by those who follow Jesus.

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

Here’s how I see this playing out in my life:

* When I spend my time with Christ, I can’t wait to start doing what He says.
* When I come to church and worship Christ it gives me the fuel I need to keep going in life.
* When I read the Bible, it doesn’t take long for it to manifest itself in me and pretty soon it becomes like a fire shut up in my bones that I cannot contain. I just gotta share it!
* When I pray, there’s a peace that comes over me. I can’t even explain it.
* When I rest and remember all that He’s done, gratitude overflows from my heart.
* When I fast, I learn to lean on God more in times of struggle and remember He’s my provider.
* When I Sabbath, I remember that it’s not about me. I am centered on the one who created it all.

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

Many people think that if they are having a problem doing the things that Jesus asks, that they have a doing problem. That if they aren’t loving, they just try to grit their teeth together and say, “I need to be more loving.” Or if they are having a problem being generous, they pull up their bootstraps and say, “I’m just going to give more.” But I want to tell you God doesn’t invite you into a pull up your bootstraps or grit your teeth together relationship. He invites you into a relationship to come and be with Him. And I believe that you don’t have a doing problem, you have a being problem. If you are having a problem doing what He asks, my bet is that you haven’t been with Him like you should have.

Many of us in this room would say that we want to live like Jesus, to follow Him more closely. And I’m sure you’ve noticed, but the people you spend your time with matter. Many times we even start acting like them or saying words or phrases that they say by accident. In fact, show me the top 5 people you hang out with and I guarantee you I could tell you a lot about yourself! You start acting like the people you hang around. **If you want to act like Jesus, hang with Him.** Time spent in the presence of someone will eventually find its expression in your actions.

Many of us say that Jesus is our number one priority. But I don’t think that’s what our actions show many times. Because if He is your number one priority, then why is it that you have a hard time carving out time for Him? But Zach, you just don’t understand, my life is so busy, you just work one day a week. Okay, maybe it is, so why is your number one priority, God, the one that first gets cut. If God is most important, shouldn’t He be the last thing that gets cut. Shouldn’t Netflix get cut before Jesus? Shouldn’t prayers be more important than posts. If God is most important, our top priority, why is it that many of us will check a post before we pray? Why is that we hit the email before we hit our knee-mail? Oh that’s corny but I feel like I’m preaching now. I’m going to keep going.

Ladies, isn’t spending time with the one who had nails pierce through His hands and feet for you more important than getting your nails done? Besides, no guy ever cares about your nails anyway. I just feel like I need to tell you this. I know I'm meddling in all this kind of stuff, but ladies, you get your nails done for other ladies anyway. Guys don't care. I just need to tell you that, right? You know it. I've never heard a guy in the locker room say, "Dude. Did you see the set of nails on that babe? Woo! I want some of those nails. You think they're real, or fake?" Never heard that. Never heard that, right?

Guys, shouldn’t God come before hunting? I know it’s convenient to leave your family and go out there in nature, have a few drinks, shoot some guns, and by the way, I love to pick on hunting because I don’t hunt so it’s easy for me to pick on. What’s your favorite hobby? Mine’s golf. I love it. And there’s nothing wrong with it, but God is more important than golf.

And I’m not saying it’s wrong to watch Netflix, to have a social media account, to get your nails done, to hunt, to golf, they are fine. But none of them are good if they take the place of the one that should be on the throne of your heart and that’s Jesus. **Good things can become bad things when they become god things** in your heart.

I’m just saying the things that you fill your lives with, the things that you prioritize will come out. What goes in will come out. That’s true in what you eat. If you eat burgers and bacon, you won’t be healthy. If you eat kale, you’ll be healthy, but you’ll be miserable. It’s a choice you have to make. If you spend your time hanging around with drug addicts, it’ll come out. If you spend your time hanging around with your home group, it’ll come out. If you spend your time being with Jesus, it’ll come out. And that’s really what this whole challenge is about. Spend time, be with Jesus, and then you’ll do like Jesus.

But I just don’t have time Pastor Zach. And I believe people highly exaggerate how busy they really are in this world. Why do I say this? Because people on average are watching more than 4 hours of television a day and spend about 2 hours with their cell phone devices a day. People can still manage to keep their dozen social media accounts active. It’s not a time issue. It’s a priority issue. But people feel tired, they feel exhausted, because they are not getting true rest. What goes in will come out. You are filling your life with things and people that ultimately cannot give you rest. But Jesus says in Matthew 11:28, **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”**

Why is being with Him so important? Because **when we be with Christ, our doing is so much more effective.** And we are going to talk about doing a lot for Him. That’s part of being a disciple. But the more you are with Christ, the more you understand what He’s done for you and the more you can’t help but want to do things for Him.

So here’s what I’m asking you to do…prioritize Jesus. Okay, how do I do that? You find ways to be near Him, to learn from Him. You sit at His feet. But Zach, he’s not here today…so what does that mean? You do the things that will get you close to Him.

**You come to church** regularly and make it a priority. You don’t schedule your church around baseball. You don’t schedule Disney ahead of church. You just don’t. You say, no, church is more important than It’s a Small World, which is probably the stupidest ride in the world anyway. You say, no, Jesus is more important than Mickey. You come to church.

**You read the Bible**. You intentionally schedule time in your day or you follow a reading plan to read the Bible in a year, New Testament in a year…I mean just some sort of plan that gets you in the Bible on a regular basis and you hold yourself accountable with a few others. You text back verses that you read or you meet weekly to talk about what God is saying to you. You do not just keep the Bible on a shelf and let it collect dust and then pull it off every now and then when you organize your books and just open your Bible to whatever page and read. You make it intentional. You intentionally be with Christ.

**You get in a home group** or a mentoring group or a small group of some kind. This life and relationship with Christ is too hard on your own. You have to do it with other people. If you are doing it by yourself, you have no accountability and that accountability is important, otherwise you will get burnt out and fried by the world and want to give up and have no one to lift you up at that time.

**You pray**. You start with one minute if you’ve never prayed. Once you pray one minute, then next week you try two minutes. You write down your prayer requests if you need help focusing. You can journal it. You can download an app that will remind you when to pray. You sign up to pray on the prayer warriors team here at theCross and you’ll literally get the prayer requests of the church emailed to you every week! We’ll give you what to pray for!

**You listen to worship music**. Rather than listening to whatever the top 40 hits are in the world out there (and I’m not saying there’s never a time for other music), but you redeem the long commute you have to work. You blast some Hillsong or Elevation or turn on your local Christian radio station.

**You take your Sabbath**. You intentionally schedule this day is not for work. I’m not working this day. I’m using this day to rest. I trust God will take care of things at work while I’m not there. And on that Sabbath you plan some intentional alone time with God. Some silent time. Phone’s not in the room. Screens are off. It’s just you and him. You do this each and every week. If someone asks to meet with you on your Sabbath, No…I’m busy. If someone really needs you that day…No…because I need God more than you need me right now.

**You schedule a 2-3 day retreat every year** for you to get closer to Christ. But Zach, when will I find the time to do that? Put it on your calendar now and protect those dates. You can find 2-3 days for a weekend trip to go watch a sports game. God is more important than sports…yes, even more important my playoff Cleveland Indians!

If you do those things I mentioned above, and there’s other ways you can spend time with Jesus as well, you will have prioritized him in your schedule and then we find rest, just like He said. You’ll be able to not just start, but finish. Isaiah 40:30-31 says:

**Even youths grow tired and weary,
    and young men stumble and fall;
31but those who hope in the Lord
    will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
    they will run and not grow weary,
    they will walk and not be faint.**

There it is…when we be, when we rest we find the energy, the stamina, the endurance that we need to not just start, but finish! It’s great to start strong, and we’ve had a great start here in the RLC but let’s finish strong. Let’s keep this thing rolling.

While competing in the marathon in Mexico City, John Stephen Akhwari cramped up due to the high altitude of the city. He had not trained at such an altitude back in his country. At the 19 kilometer point during the 42 km race, there was jockeying for position between some runners and he was hit. He fell badly wounding his knee and dislocated that joint plus his shoulder hit hard against the pavement. He however continued running, finishing last among the 57 competitors who completed the race (75 had started). The winner of the marathon, [Mamo Wolde](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mamo_Wolde) of [Ethiopia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethiopia), finished in 2:20:26. Akhwari finished in 3:25:27,[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Stephen_Akhwari#cite_note-2) when there were only a few thousand people left in the stadium, and the sun had set. A television crew was sent out from the medal ceremony when word was received that there was one more runner about to finish.

As he finally crossed the finish line a cheer came from the small crowd. When interviewed later and asked why he continued running, he said, "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race; they sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race.

God did not send you; He did not send me; He did not start this church only to see us fall short and give up. He sent us to finish what He's started. God will complete what He started. **Whatever God starts He finishes.**  You may start some things and not finish. But what God starts He finishes!

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

He will finish the work he has started. It doesn't mean it will be easy. It will be very hard, but we have God's promise he will finish the work he had started and also when it's hard we can cast our cares on him. When it's hard we can lean and rely on Him, who gave everything He had for us.

He went all the way to the cross, not holding onto anything except the hope and joy set before Him, he gave everything until he uttered the words, Tetelestai. It is finished. Our God is a finisher! He finished by giving it everything that He had. He gave it all so that we can give it all. Is there any worthier cause than following after Jesus?

* If he has started in you a new relationship with Him, He has given you enough grace and will give you enough grace to see it all the way through.
* If he has started a marriage, He will give you the strength, reconciliation, and forgiveness needed to bring that marriage to the end.
* If he has blessed you with children, He will give you the direction, purpose, and vision for raising your kids.
* If he has started you in recovery, He will give you the power needed to combat the temptations of this world
* If he has started this church to reach a city for Jesus, He will give us the power, the people, and the resources to make it happen.
* If he has started a movement where people put His words into practice and change the picture we are representing of Him, He will give us the strength to finish.

He’s a God that finishes. No matter what happens. They tried stopping Him. They put Him on a cross, nailed Him there, and buried Him in a ground. You are done. You are finished. And God said, No, no, no, I’m not done yet. You don’t get to tell me when I’m finished. I’ll finish this on my own strength. And He rose from the dead, defeated death, sin, and the devil and now welcomes us into redeeming and restoring the world with Him. Come on, let’s do this.

**RLC Week 3 Forgiving**

Welcome back to the Red Letter Challenge. We are on Day 13 of our 40-day challenge to put Jesus’ words into practice. Many in this room are following along in a workbook called the Red Letter Challenge and meeting weekly in home groups to discuss.

We are looking at the 5 main principles that Jesus calls, commands, and asks His followers to put into practice. Let’s go through what those 5 principles, those 5 targets are really quickly:

**Being / Forgiving / Serving / Giving / Going**

Last week we spent a week of being. This week we spend a week of forgiveness. And to illustrate forgiveness I’d like to take you from the couch to the temple courts to the modern day courtroom. Couch to the temple courts to the courtroom.

***Couch***

I have a couch up here on stage as an illustration today. And this couch looks very nice. No stains on the outside. Most of us own a couch at our house. And typically we have very clean couches that also look very nice. They look good on the outside. We sit on them a lot. And we even have guests over to sit on these couches. But have you ever taken a moment to flip the cushions over to see what’s underneath. Because you need to prepare yourself physically, spiritually, emotionally for what’s underneath. You might find cookie crumbs or change. You might find the Zika Virus under there, I don’t know. So anyway, there’s a few things that I found that’s just sitting under here that no one knew about. You didn’t know you were sitting on all of this crud. You had no idea.

Pull out things from under the couch cushions: a couple of coins. We’ve got a nice new theCross pen. I’ve got a golf tee. A welcome home card. Some sort of candy wrapper. And then look at this, this is kind of crazy. Underneath the couch cushions is a Cleveland Indians baseball shirt. I don’t know how the shirt of the greatest team in baseball got under here but I’ll just hang it here for subliminal messages all morning.

What’s crazy is that you would have never known this stuff was underneath here unless you flipped the cushions. A lot of us live lives represented by this couch where we try to make ourselves look pretty good on the outside. We are very well put together. No stains on the outside. We come to church on a Sunday and we act like politicians. We hug people and kiss babies and shake hands, you know. We look great on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and LinkedIn, you know, our family, we’re so happy, we’re doing awesome. Highlight Reels to behind the scenes.

But the reality is that we are very much like this couch. If you dig deep down, there is something inside each and every one of us that is messy. And a lot of us, we push this stuff down in the cracks and we tend to forget that it’s there or we come up with coping mechanisms so that we can live with the garbage and the junk that’s underneath us. We just suppress it.

And it can be easy to form a community then around this type of picture. And churches can form around this form of picture. In fact, theCross can be that way. Where everything looks great up here, but underneath it, just below the surface, is a bunch of stuff we are not so proud of. And what happens is sometimes people whose lives that don’t look so great, couches that look a little dirty on the outside, maybe they have a noticeable stain or two on the outside, they come into a setting like this and they can be intimidated because they feel like they are the only one and let me tell you that you are not. You are not. This kind of community that is built on what is fake, and plastic, and inauthentic is not real community at all. Real community in the pathway to freedom is understanding this is who we are, the good, the bad, the ugly. Real freedom comes in knowing that we are a mess first and foremost.

Because that’s not a given these days. Some people think they are just fine. They don’t need to change. I’ve been to many funerals and I’ve hear people say, it’s okay. He was a good person. She was a good person. She’s in a better place now because of that. Well, geez, I’m not sure where they are picking that theology up from. Because the Bible that I read tells us in Romans 3:10 that **there is no one righteous, not even one.** I think when Paul meant no one, not even one, he was including you in that. It is imperative that each of you know that you are a sinner, that you are guilty.

Deep inside each person in this room you might be surprised to know there is a great deal of hurt, including the guy you are looking at. All of us carry that around. Deep down underneath the cushions, there’s a mess, right? Deep down on the inside many of us are hurting, many of us are in pain and maybe your close friends don’t even know it. Maybe your spouse doesn’t even know it. Many of us are not free because we’re held captive to the past. It’s like an old couch that we can’t get rid of, we keep reliving the mess over and over again.

**if you can’t let go of the past, you’ll never be able to grab a hold of the future.**

Now listen, if you’re a Jesus follower, if you call yourself a Christian, I want you to listen to what I’m about to say: Jesus did not die on a cross, suffer a brutal death, and then rise from the dead so that you could live the rest of your life as a slave. God sent His son to die on a cross for you so that you could know freedom and you could be free from your past and you could be free in the present and you could go into the future with a sense of freedom.

Some of you God wants to flip the cushions over this morning, bring up some things that you thought you had put away. And the reason why I mention that is because when you mention the words righteous, just, there is freedom that comes with that. But can we truly live a free life if we are living on a bunch of crud underneath? God wants to take away all the crap, the crud, the junk, the past, and remove it this morning.

There is a really cool story about God’s grace. A lot of people struggle to talk about what God is like. They use a lot of different words and he’s hard to understand. He’s the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He’s co-equal, co-eternal. And so it’s really hard to picture Him, and understand what He would do in a particular situation. And when we talk about the courtroom later on this morning, it’s hard to know what God would be like in that setting, but what’s great is that God gives us clear pictures to help us know who He is. And **the clearest picture that you can have of God is Jesus Christ.** Jesus Christ is God. He sent Jesus into this world to reveal to us what God is like, what is character is like, how he would act, how he would respond in certain situations that you or I might go through.

And one of the most amazing stories about Jesus is from John chapter 8 because in this story we are going to see that Jesus is going to come to a woman’s defense. And so now we are moving from a couch to the temple courts, it’s not an actual courtroom but it’s the temple courts.

***Temple Courts***

They are bringing an accused woman before Jesus. And Jesus is going to act as the defense attorney and the judge in this story. What’s unique about this story among many others in the Word of God is right above or below it possibly in your Bible it will in bold or italics it will say the earliest manuscripts don’t have this story included. This story has not been in every manuscript and some people think it’s because of the controversial nature. That what Jesus does in this story is so scandalous. Check it out.

***1but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.***

***2At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.* *3The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group***

At this point you might be asking. Where’s the man? If she’s committing an adulterous act there is at least 2 people. Where is the man? They just brought the woman.

***4and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery.* *5In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women.* *Now what do you say?”***

And so far, they are right, besides not bringing the man of course. The Law says in Deuteronomy 22:22, "If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel."

***6They were using this question as a trap,* *in order to have a basis for accusing him.***

This was an elaborate plan that they had been hatching for a while. Probably the reason the man wasn’t brought in with the woman is because the man was in on it. And this woman is a means to an end to trap Jesus. That’s what they Pharisees were doing. They were bringing this woman to him to catch Him in a difficult situation. They will catch Him in a contradiction in front of all His disciples. If he answers, yes, "Stone her," then that seems to go against everything he's been doing and teaching and so that wouldn’t feel right...if he says, "No, don't stone her," then he would seem to be as one relaxing on his public morals and the Law and the Law is important and you do want to follow the Law. So they bring this question that is meant to trap Him. But these cunning hypocrites were overmatched.

***But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.***

Can you picture that. They’ve hatched this plan. They’ve rehearsed this question. And here they are. It’s the moment they’ve been waiting for and Jesus stoops down and starts doodling on the ground. Can you imagine how frustrating this must have been? They thought they had him and it feels like at this point he’s ignoring them. I can’t imagine this plan that they had been working on for weeks or months and the big Aha moment and Jesus doodles.

***7When they kept on questioning him,***

They weren't happy with his response, so it says they kept probing...

***he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone* *at her.”* *8Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.9At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.***

It’s fascinating what the Word of God includes. But there’s also some fascination about what is not included. It’s one of the big questions that scholars and pastors have is what did Jesus write on the ground that day? There’s a lot of theories out there. Some of them that are most intriguing:

Number 1: He was doodling, just drawing stick figures or something because this doesn’t even merit my time.

Number 2: He was writing a Bible verse...who knows what Bible verse, he knew a lot of them. Maybe Jesus was writing a Bible verse.

Number 3: the most interesting...and I don’t know but because it doesn’t say we can speculate is that some scholars suggest that perhaps Jesus started writing down the names of the people who were standing in that circle holding those stones wanting to kill that woman. And out beside their name maybe he wrote some of their sins. Because they thought they had the dirt on this women, but Jesus gets down in the dirt, oh you want to talk about dirt...I know some things. Henry, last Tuesday, lust, then he draws a line to make a connection, Tom's wife...and Henry gets up and leaves real quick now and Tom follows him and they have a discussion on down the road and Tom's got that stone, so watch out. Tina, 1994...senior Prom...Mt. Dora High School Benjy McCluskey, Ford Taurus and she leaves, no one stays around. And you know what it says, the older one's left first...why, because they had the longest list...a little more dirt, because we all have dirt and crud underneath the cushions, when you take the mask off.

What I think is fascinating about this story. A lot of people think that we need to come to Jesus with our best and then he’ll come and forgive me. What I love about this story is that thus far in the story this woman has not said a thing. In fact, if you can imagine, and don’t let your mind trail off too much, but think about this. 30 minutes earlier she was literally sleeping with another woman’s husband. 30 minutes earlier. Had no idea. And now they dragged her in front of Jesus. She was not planning on being in front of Jesus. She was not planning on her life changing. She was not planning on staring into the eyes of her loving savior. She hasn’t said anything. She hasn’t made an elaborate confession. And here we have Jesus breaking into her life in a way that was completely unexpected.

Some of you may be here today or at a point in your life where your wife is dragging you to church, or finally I’ll come to your church just so my friend will stop bugging me and so I’ll come. What I want to tell you is that Jesus will come to you when you have no idea and he will flip the cushions over in your life and say, “I’ve got something better for you if you want it.” I’ve got something better. If you want it.

***10Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”***

***11“No one, sir,” she said.***

***“Then neither do I condemn you,”* *Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”***

The only one that had the ability to hold a rock dropped his rock. Woman, I didn’t come to condemn you. I came to save you. I didn’t come to declare you guilty. I came to set you free.

In fact, most people know John 3:16. **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

But do you know the very next verse?

**17For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

He came to justify each and every one of us. This woman’s couch cushions got flipped on her in front everyone to see and Jesus said I can take that crud, I can take that mess. Don’t listen to the lies of the other people. The jury is gone now. All your naysayers are out of here and it’s just me and you. Oh man, I love it when my naysayers are gone. I love it when my accuser is gone and it’s just me and Jesus. I’ve been your defense attorney and because no one else is around I’m your judge too. I’m declaring you forgiven, set free, innocent, not guilty, now go and be free, sin no more.

When we follow after Christ and when we live in this world for Jesus the enemy is powerful. And he will shout accusations at you. He will throw his rocks at you and remind you of what you did, what you said, what you didn’t do. And he will remind you, remind you, remind you. He will tell you that you are no good, you are used goods, you are washed up, and God could never love a person like you. Nobody could love you.

**One of the biggest problems** we have in this world **is that we listen to the lies and accusations of the enemy far more than we listen to the truth of the Gospel** that says Jesus came to save us and justify us.

Jesus loves you. Every time the enemy tries to remind you, remind him that Jesus didn't condemn you...the only one who had a rock to throw didn't throw it but looked at this woman with eyes of mercy and love, I want you to know the next time when the accusations start flying out, about how dirty you are, about how worthless you are, about how messed up you are, just go and say to the devil, "Ya, I'm messed up, and I've screwed up, but God got down in my dirt, and forgave my sins, and wiped my past clean, and he didn't condemn me, because he didn't come to condemn the world, but change the world, save the world, and so you gotta drop your rock devil, because I'm already forgiven. I'm already loved. Drop your rock devil, I've got a Savior staring me in the eyes telling me to sin no more.

There's mercy in the mud.

For every dirty person, unclean person, everybody with some regrets, every lost person, every broken person, I want you to know...God stoops down low and raises you up high and if he raises you up ain’t no person and no devil that can bring you down.

And so now we move from the couch to the temple courts to the modern day courtroom.

***Courtroom***

Thankfully I haven’t had much experience in the courtroom before. I do remember a story that involved me in court even though I actually didn’t even go to court.

What follows is a story for me when I was guilty but got away with something. Maybe you have an instance or a story you could tell.

I had a rough week a couple of years ago. I was driving home, it was a Wednesday evening, I think it was pretty late at that point, bedtime already, and because of that I was speeding in my neighborhood. I would never speed without a good excuse, right? Never. There was never cops in my neighborhood, but that night sure enough there was a cop. And he pulled me over, I had my kids in the back, and I thought maybe he’ll let me go because I have two cute adorable kids. Maybe he’ll find out that I’m a pastor and he’ll have grace for me there.

So he pulled me over and came to the window, do you know why I pulled you over, yes, I was speeding, I’m sorry officer. You were going 38 in a 25. I’m sorry. And so he goes back to his car and comes back not with a warning, but a ticket. And he said I gave you some grace. I took you from 38 in a 25 to 35 in a 25. And I said, Office I don’t know if you understand what grace really is. Grace is not a partial gift man. It’s a totally free gift that’s undeserved. I didn’t actually say that, it’s what I wanted to say. You don’t say that to an officer, you say, thank you so much, even though on the inside you can’t stand him.

I went home, told my wife, frustrated. Went to bed, woke up the next morning, got in our other car to go to work. And all of the sudden, lights from a cop are flashing behind me 11 hours after the night before. This time the cop wasn’t in his car, he was on his motorcycle. And I wasn’t sure what happened so I was just hoping maybe they revoked the ticket from the night before and were coming to tell me the good news. And the man walks away from his motorcycle and comes to the car and I look in the rear view mirror and it’s the same guy!

I roll down my window, and he says, you again. Well good morning, officer. “Do you know why I pulled you over? No I don’t actually. I had you at running a stop sign back there. And I thought, really, oh man, I’m sorry about that. And I was really bummed. And I was thinking there’s no hope at all. But then finally he said, “Just out of curiosity, what do you do? I see you zipping around, speeding, running stop signs, what is so important that you have to get to.” And I thought finally, I can tell him, “I’m a pastor. Like you I serve the city. We can relate to each other in that way on that level. Doing some good things together for the city.”

He said, Okay, what church do you pastor. And I didn’t want him to know the real truth so I said, “First Baptist,” just kidding of course. I told him the truth. He went back to his car and he came back super quick. I’m thinking that’s a good sign because it was so quick. Comes up to the window. He says, “here’s your ticket for running the stop sign and here’s another ticket for not having an active registration.” Turns out the reason he came back so quick is because he had all my information from the night before. So there you have it…I had 3 tickets in less than 10 hours.

Since then, I haven’t had any. I can still drive to the church, I’m pretty excited about that.

So I was really bummed, but I had a friend named Frank who was an attorney. And he comes here. I was talking about this. And I said, Frank, I’m guilty. I know I was speeding. I didn’t think I rolled through a stop sign but I don’t know for sure. Tickets are a lot of money, I’ll pay them. But the officer did say I can go to court if I want but I don’t know what that means. Frank said, “Just give me the tickets. Don’t ask any questions. I’ll take care of them for you.”

And I said, are you sure. And he said ya. I said did we have this conversation and Frank said No.

Okay, whatever, so a few months later Frank is going to fight my case in court. And I get a text from Frank and I’ve got a screenshot of it here. (I will email picture)

And he says, “Dude the deputy isn’t happy with you. Talking increased fines and 8-12 hours in person school. I will get back to you. And of course my response, are you serious, that’s ridiculous. The max fine is $500 per ticket…geez, you got me worried now, when will you find out?

And he went silent for a few hours and finally called me back. And I said, Frank, what happened. He said, dude I was just messing with you. You are totally free. The cop didn’t show up. You are not guilty, you are innocent. I said Frank how does that work. I’m guilty. I messed up. But ya, the guy didn’t show up. I said, “Good, well done, I’m proud of you.” And what I thought in that moment was I was guilty going into that courtroom but I walked out of it not guilty. Why?

Because I knew Frank and Frank was my advocate, pleading on my behalf. And he got me out of it, and whether that’s right or not, that’s for you to judge, but we are not judging here today, right? That’s what the story is about. What I love about that story is we have a God who has declared us not guilty. When you get to the courtroom, it’s important who you know. In this case, I knew Frank P. Remsen attorney at law, and in our cases all of us know Jesus Christ. And so what I see in the courtroom of heaven Jesus Christ is your defense attorney. You know him. He is there for you.

It’s just like in my story, where the cop didn’t show up. In this case, the enemy, the devil doesn’t show up into that courtroom because Jesus Christ is there, he’s more powerful. He’s already conquered him and defeated him. Jesus walks into that courtroom he’s your defense attorney, and when God the Father who is the judge says your name Jesus Christ says not guilty. Jesus Christ says free. He says innocent. He says just. He says righteous. Because I know Jesus. He’s my Savior. It doesn’t matter what I’ve done. I am guilty. So are you. But because we know Jesus, we are not guilty. Jesus was not afraid to get in the dirt for this woman, and I want to tell you he was not afraid to get even dirtier for you when he went up on a cross, extended his arms, and blood came out every which way. He shed his blood for you on the cross because that was the price and the penalty to pay.

1 John 2:1 says it this way:

**My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.**

And because you know that man, that king, that God, you are free, you are just, you are righteous, not because you deserve it but because He is a good God that loves you. Maybe you feel like the woman, full of sin, very apparent what that sin is in your life, you can see it. God says to you, you are my child, you are forgiven. You are not washed up. You are not used goods. You have a new life in me.

Or maybe you are like the Pharisees who honestly look like nice couches, where their lives looked like they were put together but deep down on the inside their hearts are off. And what God says to you is the same thing he says to the woman. Your sin might be a little harder to detect. You are guilty too but my grace covers you. It’s important who you know in the courtroom. We know the defense attorney and the defense attorney knows the judge. You are free. You are not guilty.

Go and sin no more.

As we continue to put Jesus’ words into practice, we will be with Him. When we be with Him, we will see and experience His forgiveness anew. As we experience His forgiveness, we can’t help but want to share his forgiveness with others.

And I believe the time for forgiveness is right now. We who have been forgiven have to lead the charge in our nation. People are against each other like never before. Racial tensions are high in our nation and sadly, far too many are escalating the situation. Social media has become a platform for hatred and division. At theCross, we want to lead the charge with forgiveness because that’s what God did for us. Somebody’s got to lead the charge. And we want that to be the family of faith-filled, big-thinking followers of Jesus Christ.

**RLC Week 4 Serving**

Talk about a story where you’ve done something but you did it the wrong way…here’s mine…

Have you ever done the right thing in the wrong way? I have and a couple of weeks ago it resulted in a little argument with me and my wife.

Let me set the scene for you. I was working hard all day at work. She was working hard all day at home. One of the things she did, in the Florida heat mind you, was go through our mulch in the front (and we have quite a bit) and do weeding and put a bunch of the weeds, extra branches, sticks, and used mulch into bags that turned out to be quite heavy. I got home in the evening this particular day and she asked me if I would move the bags after she’d done so much hard work. And I did not at all after my long, draining day want to move any big heavy yard bags. But she wanted it done right away. And she has this way of getting me to do some things that I don’t like doing.

Some of you guys, you love to do yard work. You love to fix things, you are really handy and you find your identity in things like this. I’m not like this. I hate doing yard work, especially in Florida. In fact, I hate doing any work around the house. Number one because I’m not very good at it, and number two, I simply don’t enjoy it.

A couple of weeks ago I posted that we needed to get a new toilet installed and asked if anyone knew how to replace a toilet and wanted to help me. I was met with some snarky comments of “Youtube” and “if you’re a man, you can do it” by many of my so-called friends. To which I responded, I am a man. I’m simply not a handyman, but I don’t know many men that could stand up on a stage each and every Sunday and boldly proclaim the word of God so back it off.

Plus, every time I’ve watched a YouTube video, it never goes as easy as that. I always run into problems and I don’t have much confidence in this area. Anyway, I don’t like doing things around the house. I hate yard work. I wasn’t in the mood. But I went out. And I started moving bags. And I was grumpy as all get-out. And I made sure my wife noticed that “I’m doing you a favor.” And she said, why are you so grumpy? And I said, because you are making me move these stupid bags right now! And she said something interesting, she said, “Can’t you just fake that you are enjoying this?” And I said, why would I fake it. I hate it. There is nothing about this that I like right now.

Anyway, it didn’t go well. I was angry at her making me move bags in that moment. She was angry that I didn’t have a good attitude while I was moving the bags. And here’s the root of it. She worked very hard for many hours that day preparing these yard bags. When I was grumpy and pitching a fit, I was showing her that I wasn’t grateful for what she had done that day. And at the end of the day, if you love someone, you want them to want to help you. I don’t want my wife doing things against her will just because she loves me. I don’t want her serving me with a bad attitude. I want her to enjoy serving me. I want her to serve me because of how well I have loved her. And vice versa she wants me to serve her because of how much I love her.

Listen, the reality is that just like with moving yard waste, I’m probably never going to love doing the dishes. But I can still happily do the dishes because I love my wife. It’s almost like the motivation behind what you are doing is even more important than the thing you are doing.

Let me say this when it comes to serving God. **I believe the motivation behind what you do is more important than what you do.** I believe that Jesus is more interested in us fulfilling the spirit of the Law than the letter of the Law.

And it’s out of that belief that I need to remind you of what we are doing here at theCross.

We entered into a 40-day challenge to put Jesus’ words into practice. We are calling it the Red Letter Challenge because in many of the Bible’s the words of Jesus are in red. After all that Jesus has done for us, and the ways in which He’s served us, and given His life for us, we are extremely motivated to represent Him well and do what He asks us to do. We aren’t doing this challenge out of guilt or obligation, we aren’t doing this challenge gritting our teeth together. We are doing this challenge because really at the heart of it, we love Jesus and we want to be the greatest followers of Jesus that we can be.

So we’ve categorized a lot of the things that Jesus invites His followers to put into practice into 5 main principles:

**Being/Forgiving/Serving/Giving/Going**

We’ve looked at being and forgiving. And now we are looking at serving.

And there’s a flow to it. When we “be” with Christ, when we spend time with Him we see just how much He loves us. Just as important, we see that God has been gracious to us and He forgives us. After being with Him and receiving His forgiveness, now I’m ready and motivated to put His words into practice. In other words, after Jesus has done all the hard work, I’ll now do my part in representing Him. Or to put in a different way, let’s say that Jesus spent hours on a hot Florida summer day putting yard waste together for my benefit, and I’m so grateful for that, that right away I jump up without even having to be asked to move yard waste bags. And with that I officially apologize to my amazing, beautiful, incredible, supportive wife Allison Zehnder and now can move on with this message.

Serving, we are talking about serving today. And **we want to serve Jesus because He has served us.**

Inside of all of us, we like the idea of serving. But sometimes we don’t really want to. I remember many times signing up for a service project that would be on a Saturday morning and I would always remember on Friday night and even on Sunday morning I would always be like, “Man, why did I sign up?” I’d much rather sleep in. I’m sure you’ve never thought that. I’m a broken sinner. But I’d force myself to get up. And I would go. And I would serve. And you know what, I always had fun!

After the hurricane hit, I signed up on the serve team. I put in the notes Zehnder’s are not handy, but happy to lend a hand where needed. I also said I’d like to bring my two boys to give them an opportunity to serve. So finally, we got an opportunity and I told my boys, and they were not happy at all. Ugh, why do we have to go do this. We have off of school and you are making us go pick up sticks, what do we get if we go? And I said, nothing, we are doing this because this is what Jesus followers do! And I am teaching you the right way.

It was a dogfight to get there, but once we got there, you know what happened? My kids had a blast and they wanted to go help someone else. And I think there’s something to be learned there. Serving does not come naturally to us, but I’m here to tell you it’s more important than you know.

Have you heard of Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs? I think I shared it once before here. He came up with it in 1943. Maslow stated that people are motivated to achieve certain needs in life and that some needs take precedence over other. Our most basic need, so at the bottom of the pyramid, our very first, most basic foundational needs are physical needs. We need food, water, warmth, rest. Then the next need is a safety need, we need security and safety. Once those needs are met, we need love needs. We need intimate relationships and friendships. Then esteem needs: prestige and feelings of accomplishment. And finally at the very top of the pyramid for Maslow, in other words, to reach our highest level of fulfillment is that he came up with is self-actualization needs, in other words achieving one’s full potential.

And this has been a major tool used in psychology courses for many decades. But as they studied it they’ve now added three other levels in the pyramid, and amazingly, they added a need that’s even higher on the pyramid. Psychology now says the greatest need in this world that we can meet, the one at the very top of the pyramid which used to be self-actualization needs, but they said there’s a higher one. It’s called transcendence needs. In other words, once you have achieved your highest potential, self-actualization, the thing that will bring us the most fulfillment is actually when we who have achieved our highest potential actually help others reach their highest potential. When you help them reach self-actualization themselves. That’s the highest level of fulfillment you can have in this world.

When you serve and help someone else that brings you the greatest fulfillment in this world. Let me say it this way: what psychology has determined is that **Nothing fulfills you more than serving others**. Serving others invites you into a life that is bigger than yourselves.

Our purpose will always flow out of our identity. The Bible tells us very clearly that Jesus was in fact a servant. He actually says to His disciples at one point that He did not come to this world to be served but rather He came to serve us. As believers we have God’s Spirit living on the inside of us. We were made in His image and so if He is a servant, then when we represent Him best in this world, so too, are we.

The reason we get so much joy out of serving others is because that’s how God made, that’s how He wired you. Being servants are a part of our identity in Christ. When we serve people we are not just thanking Jesus for what He did for us but we are actually stepping into our God given identity. Serving others brings us Joy because as we serve others out of our new Identity in Christ we fulfill our God Given purpose.

We see this so clearly in the Gospels when Jesus first calls the disciples to leave what they are doing and follow Him. I am always amazed at how the disciples were willing to leave everything behind and follow Jesus. Especially because at this point Jesus had done no miracles. He had not done much of anything at this point. Why follow this man? Maybe it was because of what He said to them. He said “If you follow Me, I will make you fishers of men.”

Look very carefully at this promise Jesus makes the Disciples. He says that He would transform their identities and that out of that new identity would come the ability to change men’s lives the same way a fisherman can change a fish’s life. It’s important for you to serve because it’s important for you to be the real you. You need to serve the way a fish needs to swim or a bird needs to fly. If you are not living a life of service, you will be unhappy because you will be living a lie.

One of the reasons we struggle with walking in this new identity is the culture that we are in. Our culture leads us to be only consumers and not contributors. We live in a culture that certainly understands consumption, but struggles with contribution. And often time, we cater to consumers.

In fact, I heard one speaker talk about this. I wrote down his notes. He says, “A company will promote their quality, value, style, service, selection, convenience, savings, performance, experience, low rates, friendly service, name brands, easy terms, affordable prices, money-back guarantee, free installation, free admission, free appraisal, free alterations, free delivery, free estimates, free home trials, and free parking. No cash? No problem! No kidding. No fuss. No risk. No obligation. No red tape. No down payment. No entry fee. No hidden fees. No purchase necessary. No one will call on you. No payments until September. And don’t forget to pick up your free gift: a classy, deluxe, custom designer, luxury, prestige, high-quality, premium, one-of-a-kind pencil holder – yours for the asking, no purchase necessary. Why? Because you are that important to us.”

The American mindset is that “The customer is always right.” And businesses and restaurants try to make it as easy as possible for the consumer to have it just the way they want it. Burger King had the right idea when they started the, “Have it your way” slogan. We have turned into a consumer minded nation. We’ve even turned into consumer minded churches. Consumer minded Christians.

Unfortunately, this consumer mindset has made its way right into the church. I am not saying that you should not go and find the church that God has called you to be in but some people are constantly changing churches. They are never happy with the preaching or the worship or the home groups or the youth ministry. They change churches every six months because they never find what they are looking for. Please hear my heart here for a minute. **You have been made by God to serve and to live for something bigger then yourself.**

The reason you are getting nothing out of church is because your view of the church is wrong. The church is not a business that is called to meet your every need. The church is a movement of people that has been called to serve and guess what? You are one of those people that form the church! You have been unhappy with church for the last ten years because you have completely missed the purpose of the church and your role in it. Get plugged in and start serving and I promise you those other things that have been bothering you will start to fade away.

There’s a well-known story in John, chapter 4, where Jesus stops at a well to talk to a Samaritan woman. That in itself broke several cultural barriers. But there’s a little known scene in this well-known story. After the woman goes away the disciples come back. They had gone into town to grab food for themselves. And John records the conversation:

***31Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.”***

***32But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”***

And they are thinking, how is this possible. It’s Sunday, how do you have Chick Fil A? I thought it was closed. What is Jesus talking about…and that’s exactly what they say in the next verse…

***33Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”***

They didn’t get it, so Jesus explains.

***34“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.***

Essentially Jesus says, “When others are consumers and think fill me fill me fill me, what nourishes me is when I pour into the lives of others. The disciples were more worried about consuming, but Jesus was more worried about contributing. He looked out and saw that the people from the village were coming out to him. He felt more revitalized, more rejuvenated, more filled when he was serving others and leading them to faith in him.

There’s a time to consume. There’s a time to be. We’ve talked about that already and that’s important in our relationship with Jesus. But there’s also a time to do. And I would argue that **we have greater fulfillment in contribution than we do consumption.**

If Jesus is wired to feel revitalized and re-energized by contributing, and since we are made in the image of God, we too are wired that way. Psychology tells us this. Jesus tells us this. He has made us to serve. You need this as much as the people that you may be serving need you.

Serving has always been God’s plan. And you stick with what works. You stick with the plan.

That’s what the great rapper, the great actor Will Smith has done. I was reading about him the other day. He moved when he was 21 from West Philadelphia to L.A with a goal to be the biggest movie star in the world. Many people move out to L.A. with that goal but he had a plan. He did some research and noticed that the top 10-grossing movies of all time at that point had some patterns to them. He said, “We realized that ten out of ten had special effects. Nine out of ten had special effects with creatures. Eight out of ten had special effects with creatures and a love story.” And he set out to do movies with special effects with creatures that featured a love story. And look at Will Smith’s six most successful movies:

1. Independence Day: Special effects, creatures, love story, 817 million
2. Suicide Squad: Special effects, creatures, love story, 746 million
3. Hancock, special effects, 624 million
4. Men in Black 3, special effects, creatures, love story, also 624 million
5. Men in Black, special effects, creatures, love story, 589 million
6. I am Legend, special effects, creatures, love story if you count the dog, 585 million

You stick with works and Will Smith has more than 4 billion reasons to show you why that’s important.

Just as Will Smith sticks to a plan, God sticks to a plan. His plan from the beginning was that we would be His representatives. We’ve not done well. We’ve completely missed the mark. If you don’t believe me, go back to listen to week 1 of the Red Letter Challenge. We’re struggling. And it’s not the first time.

In Exodus 19:4-6 God says this to His people, the Israelites:

**‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5Now 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, 6youwill be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’**

He called them specifically to represent Him for the sake of the rest of the world, not at the expense of the rest of the world. As they would grow, and obey God, He would make them prosperous and many would see and when they did, they would point all glory to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who is our God. But if you know the story, we know the Israelites completely failed. And when they failed, God sent Jesus to show and model for us what a life in God completely looks like. Where Israel failed, Jesus did not. He lived a perfect life, fulfilled every dot and iota, every letter of the Law.

And then, after Jesus ascended, one of his 12 disciples named Peter would write these words which will sound eerily similar to what we just read but they are directed not at the nation of Israel, but to those that follow Jesus. Check this out from 1 Peter 2:9:

**9But 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.**

Again, He calls us His chosen people, a royal priesthood, a priest is someone that mediates between God and the people. We are called just like the Israelites to be His light in this world.

In fact, that’s exactly what Jesus said in Matthew 5:

**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.**

I bring all of this up to show you that from the beginning, you are God’s plan.

And this is the opportunity and the walk that God invites you into. **You are the plan and there is no Plan B.** If we are honest, we would say, I probably wouldn’t have come up with a plan to use broken, fickle people like us, but it is God’s plan. You are God’s representation. And **we represent Him best when we serve well.**

And did you catch the end of the last verse I read. Jesus said, that when you serve people might see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. We have the opportunity to point people back to Christ through what we do. Through how we serve.

Which means, hear this right now. You can’t save yourself. There is no amount of good deeds, we don’t serve Jesus to gain salvation. Jesus has already won that reward for us. And you are not serving in order to make your name great. But if we can really help point people back to what Christ has done in their lives, if we can really live such good lives, and serve so well that people can glorify God the Father what that means is this:

**You cannot save yourself but you can help save someone else**.

Wow. What an opportunity we have. We can point people back to Jesus.

You were made to serve. You need to serve. God wired you this way. You experience the greatest fulfillment this side of heaven by contributing, by serving, by living a life that is bigger than yourself.

Some of you are saying, okay, I get it, but I don’t know what to do next. I don’t know what my gifts are. I don’t know where to serve. That’s why we’re here at the church. We want to help you.

If you don’t know what your gifts are every month in Launch, week 3, we help you discover your gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12 it talks about how each and every believer has a spiritual gift. You have something to offer to the church and the community. If you don’t know what that is, go to Launch and we’ll help you discover your purpose.

I absolutely loved how our church community stepped up during the hurricane. We were prepared and ready, we had a serve team, and every request that came in I believe we helped with. There may be one or two pending that were more difficult or still waiting on some more information but it was so amazing that we had so many people that helped. In fact, it was so great that we’ve created a page on our website to permanently request help. I think sometimes people just need the permission to ask and we want to give you that. You can go to [www.thecrossmountdora.org/help](http://www.thecrossmountdora.org/help). We want to serve. We want to help. You may need help. And you will feel great when someone helps. But guess what, the person that helps you will feel great too. Because we were wired to serve.

I’m not going to come and install a toilet at your house but someone else might. We all have gifts and we want to help you discover yours and use those for God’s kingdom.

Let me tell you as well. God is doing amazing things in this church and sometimes we don’t see it all in here. But our kids ministry Camp Cross and our youth ministry called Grow are experiencing rapid growth. And we need people that say, I want to live life bigger than myself and I want to serve and help out with kids or help out with youth. We want kids to keep coming, we want those ministries to keep growing but the truth of it is it will never happen unless we have more faith-filled, big-thinking volunteers that step up and say, “yes, this is my purpose.” It may be out of your comfort zone, you may be making excuses as to why it wouldn’t work for you, but I believe there are far too many of you walking around without purpose and your purpose could be right here at this church pouring into the next generation. Statistics say that between 85 and 90% of people receive Christ before they turn 18. This is the mission field. And as Jesus says, the harvest is plentiful. There’s lots to do but the workers are few. I’m praying for more workers. More volunteers in each of those areas.

And then collectively let me give you one more way to serve. It’s our biggest event of the year. Trunk or Treat…right now we have X amount of helpers and we need Y amount in each of these areas. It’s going to be amazing. We are going to bless a community.

I don’t want anyone saying out there I don’t know where to serve. If for whatever reason you are struggling to find what to do, here’s my advice. Find a group of people that you feel like is living a life of service, that is living life on purpose, and join them. And I believe this church is doing that. We’d love to have you jump all in with us here at theCross as we go out and lift high the name of Jesus. It’s all about serving Him. Not gritting our teeth together because we have to. But excited and grateful that God would not only die for my sins and welcome me into eternal life with Him, but also that He would invite me into a life of purpose and meaning as I go out and serve Him.

And we do it all because Jesus did it for us.

I want to close with some of my favorite verses in all of the Bible. From Philippians 2:5-11:

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

**6Who, being in very natureGod,
    did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
7rather, he made himself nothing
    by taking the very natureof 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.**

**RLC Week 5 Giving**

You can start with your own story of a funny or crazy, weird gift experience…here’s mine…

Gifts are funny, aren’t they? Sometimes you can feel like you nailed a gift and it comes back to backfire. Other times you can give a gift you are not that confident in and it becomes a winner.

With kids, you never know. I often wondered why we even got them toys or gifts in their younger years because they’d spend more time playing with the box or the packing peanuts than the toy itself.

Some people are really great gift givers. Others not so great. I love my mother in law and have gotten some good gifts from her but also some really weird ones. One year I got a necklace from her that had a globe on the bottom. I never wore it. And then another time I got some Canada socks with panda bears on them. I don’t know what you do with that.

Allison is a great gift giver, but there was this one time that her gift completely backfired. One time though it didn’t work out too well.

Two years ago for my birthday she bought me a Groupon massage. Need I say more, right? Groupon massages are 50/50 right? This particular massage was at a place in Lake Mary. She planned a great day for me. I went to play golf with some friends. Then I was going to get a massage. And then I would meet my family in Sanford for dinner.

I love massages. How many of you love massages? Some of you think it’s weird to have someone else touching you. I don’t know about you, everyone has their preferences, but I don’t like getting a massage from another man. I think that’s just weird. But I love massages. And I don’t get them all the time, maybe once a year, twice if I’m lucky. One time I got a 2-hour massage and I could have stayed there much longer. I was thinking I might try to break a Guinness world record for receiving the longest massage. But anyway, I was pumped for this.

She booked the massage for me. Requested a woman. I arrived after playing a decent round of golf, great day, and a rather large Samoan man met me at the receptionist’s desk. He said, the masseuse you requested had something come up so we called to see if another one would be okay. And I said, sure, ya, that’s fine. So he gives me the instructions, you know, go into the room, disrobe, lie down, we’ll be in in a couple of minutes…and a few minutes later, sure enough, the masseuse comes in and it is the 300 pound large Samaon man. He is my masseuse.

And on my sheet I remembered I had put that I wanted a hard massage. I like it when they dig in and get in there. When I looked at this Samoan man I wasn’t sure that was a good thing. It was the first and I hope last massage I ever receive from anyone born on the international state of Samoa. It was intense from the moment it started.

I remember laying on the bed, and a massage is supposed to be a relaxing thing, but I could not relax because I was just waiting for what this guy would do next. Several times he mentioned how tense I was. And when he’d ask if it was too hard as a man, you can’t say “No” because you are a man. And so there I was for the hour getting the most aggressive massage ever known to man.

And the other thing, I’m glad I kept my boxer briefs on because I kid you not, the blankets that they cover you with were pretty much thrown on the floor. At one point when he was doing my legs he lifted my entire body up off the mat, blankets fell to the ground at that point and I think the only thing that was touching anything was the tip of my nose. It was aggressive, intense, and a total disaster. Even the way the guy “massaged” my fingers…I mean, he would take each one, toes were the same, and he would do them so aggressively and so fast there would be like this loud “Pop” sound every time. I don’t know if it was his or if it was my fingers that popped.

Honestly that hour has become a major blur and I’m not even sure what happened in there.

I have tried to explain the incident to my therapist but it’s just too difficult!

I went to dinner and my wife asked me, “So how was the massage?” And I told her I was violated and I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened in there honestly. From now on, we don’t book Groupon massages.

But as you are married or as you have kids, you learn what the other person likes. You kind of know what the winners are for gifts. You may try out different things at times for gifts, but by and large, you begin to know what the other person likes.

And I’ll tell you, when I have a good gift for Allison it is hard for me to hold it in. I love giving a good gift. I love giving a gift that is going to change someone’s attitude. Or make a difference in their life in some way. Allison’s Gift very literally impacted my life when I was turned into a pretzel by a 300 pound Samoan Bulldozer. I believe that our giving can very literally have an impact on people’s lives. Okay, maybe that’s not what I’m talking about. And this is the life that God invites us into. A life of generosity and giving.

Welcome to Week 5 of the Red Letter Challenge. Our church entered into a 40-day challenge to put the words of Jesus into practice. Many of us are following along in a workbook which you can purchase at the connection’s corner for whatever price you want, and still others are joining in home groups each week to talk about His words. We’ve noticed that much of what Jesus calls, commands, and asks His disciples to do can be summarized into 5 principles, we are calling these things the 5 targets that we are shooting for as His disciples.

And those 5 targets are (this is where audience participation portion of the sermon comes in):

**Being / Forgiving / Serving / Giving / Going**

We’ve looked at the first three in each of the last three weeks and now we are moving to the 4th principle, the 4th target that Jesus invites His followers to practice. Giving.

Out of all the principles we talk about in the Red Letter Challenge, this is the one that Jesus brings up most frequently. It is also likely the one that will be met with the widest reaction in the audience and we’ll talk about that in a moment. But as I was reading through the words of Jesus and everything that He said, and especially the frequency in which he talks about money and giving I came to this conclusion: **I’m convinced it’s impossible to be a stingy Christian.** If you are truly following Jesus, you are generous!

And I don’t even think it’s a gray issue. I believe it’s a black/white issue. To truly follow Jesus means you are truly generous. He talked about this more than he did love, heaven, or hell. In fact, he talked more about this particular thing than any other topic except the kingdom of God.

Why would Jesus talk about money so much? Why would he talk about giving as often as he did? Because people desperately need wisdom when it comes to their finances. Many of us are living paycheck to paycheck and drowning under debt. In fact, a recent study that I just saw this week says that now 78% of people who are working full-time are living paycheck to paycheck with 71% being in debt today. A Stanley and Markman study found that money is the one thing people argue about most in their marriages. No matter who you are, saving, giving, and managing money is probably a challenge.

In our culture today, financial stress is completely normal. You see it in almost everyone you come in contact with. Today, living paycheck to paycheck, it's absolutely normal. Having monthly payments...normal. Debt...normal. Worry, anxiety, fear; especially in a slowed economy is very normal. Sadly, having tension in your relationship, fights if you are married, is very, very normal. Sadly again, having little or no financial margin is very, very normal. That is one reason why this church embraces the fact that we are not normal, we are different, because normal is not working. Let’s all agree that normal is not working.

So with all of that being said let me drop this controversial statement on you. **You are rich.**

Andy Stanley says, “It’s funny, rich people are in denial. And normally we are not in denial about things we know. For instance, tall people admit they’re tall. Short people admit they are short. Athletic people admit they’re athletic. Artsy people admit they’re artsy. And they don’t mind telling you that…their car is a mess, their room is a mess, their life is a mess, and they are as happy as can be. Introverts don’t even mind telling you they are introverts, and extroverts can’t wait to tell you they are extroverts. Like they really need to tell you. But when it comes to rich people, they won’t admit it, they live in denial.”

According to statistics, if you make $40,000 a year you are in the top 4% in the world, and if you make over $48,000 a year, you are in the top 1% of earners in the world. We enjoy a quality of life that very few in the history of the world have ever experienced. Our biggest concern is not starvation, but obesity! But no matter how much we make, we are not any happier and we find ways to blow it and still be in trouble. In fact, some of you think if I can just get to this number then I’d be happy. And this number is different for some of you than others. This week I looked at an article that said 10% of those that make $100,000 struggle to make ends meet. I’m thinking, what?! How is that possible? You make 6 figures and you can’t even balance your budget. Oh that’s the problem. They don’t have a budget.

But it’s all relative. One time I heard an athlete talk about how hard it is to live on 14.6 million dollars. When talking about his contract, he said, “Why would I want to help them win a title? They’re not doing anything for me. I’m at risk. I have a lot of risk here. I got my family to feed.” Of which every sane person just hurled in their mouth. And said I bet if you give me 14.5 million I could feed my family. If you take out taxes someone did a study, not only could he have fed his family and bought each of his kids McDonald’s but each of them a franchise and 11 more for himself, he could have fed 8.3 million people for one day or a village of 400 for nearly 57 years.

It doesn’t feel like we are ever content. If we can make $100,000 and not make it, if we can live in a disillusioned world and make millions of dollars and be concerned about feeding our family, I wonder if we will ever have enough.

And according to statistics, the more Americans make, the less they give away. The rich are actually statistically far less generous than the poor and the middle class. Christian’s aren’t much better. I saw stats recently that shows the average American gives away $1600 a year, while the average Christian gives $1800 a year. If we are truly going to represent Jesus, then we have to look different and $200 a year difference doesn’t do it!

When Allison and I first got married and moved to St. Louis, our very first apartment we rented was inside of a home that was built in the very early 1900’s. A really cool, little place that was right next to Seminary where I studied. What was really interesting about this apartment is that it only had one closet, okay, and the closet was about, honestly, like this big. Why is that? Evidently, in 1910 if you were a man you probably had a suit, if you went to church or had that type of a job. You had one, maybe two, nice shirts. You had some jeans and a couple of shirts to wear, maybe a nice pair of shoes and a casual pair of shoes, and that was about it, okay. Ladies, I have no idea what you wore but evidently it would fit in the closet next to those few things. One little closet.

Fast forward to today and what do you see? Not one little closet but closets everywhere. Some of you, you have walk-in closets. Some of you, you have walk-around closets, like eight laps around your closet equals a mile. Some of you, you have what I call two-level closets. Your clothes are on one level and then you've got another level. I don't have this, but I have actually seen some that have a button that make a level come out of the ceiling. Honest-to-goodness, I know it's hard to believe, but there's like a third level. It is truly amazing. Here's what's so crazy, so many of you you've kind of got something similar to that and you can walk in with clothes on the bottom level, and clothes on the top level, and you touch all your clothes and then what do you say. You say, "I've got nothing to wear," right. It's crazy, right.

Some of you, you've got so much stuff in your closet that it doesn't fit in your big walk-in closet so you put some of it in the garage. Some of you, I've seen it, you have so much in your garage ... What is a garage made for? Automobile. You've got so much junk in your garage that you can't park your car in the garage. Some of you, you have so much stuff in your multiple closets, your two-story closet, and in your garage that you have to put stuff in your attic. There are some of you, and this is hard to believe for some people in the world, but there are some of you who have so much stuff in their closet, and in their garage, and in their attic that what do you do, you rent storage place for your stuff. You pay somebody else at another place to put your stuff that you don't use, and you don't see, and you probably forgot it's there. What do you do? You're paying to store your stuff.

The storage industry, which barely existed 25 years ago, is now larger than the music industry in our country. Across the globe, worldwide there are 52000 storage facilities…46000 of those are in the USA. We love our stuff.

Our priorities have gotten out of whack. When we care more about the stuff we’ve accumulated than helping out those in need, when we care more about the money we’re making than spending time with our family, and when we look to the money in our bank accounts instead of looking to God for our security, we need to totally change our relationship to money.

And here’s what’s crazy. Money is by definition amoral. It’s not money that is the root of all evil. It’s the love of money that is the root of all evil. The greed that comes behind it. The never being satisfied with what God has provided attitude.

Why does Jesus talk about giving so much? Because He knew this was going to be a constant struggle for us. Anytime a church or a pastor talks about money there is growing skepticism and cynicism. Usually when we announce the sermon is about giving we can expect an attendance drop-off.

And I believe it’s for two main reasons:

The first reason is because people don’t like how their hard-earned dollars have been used. Some think that Christian leaders, pastors, or churches have no right to tell them what to do with money. They’ve seen the Christians, and churches, under the name of Jesus, use it in ways that haven’t always honored God, so why should they give?

One time I was flying home and stumbling across a show that featured the lavish lifestyle of 6 megachurch preachers. Bentley’s and Bible’s. And the more I was watching the more in the pit of my stomach this felt wrong. I’m not saying that any of them are bad people and that any of them are not being used by God. Clearly they are. But the show’s focus is on how ministry is making rich pastors just got me angry. And if I was giving my money to help a pastor buy a fancy jet then I wouldn’t want to give either. I mean I think I need a jet, but I don’t need a fancy one guys. It’s hard to see dollars misused or abused in the name of Jesus.

But the second reason people don’t like to talk about money in church is because **money is the number one idol in our lives.** It is the Great American Idol. We like our things. We like building our kingdoms in this world and it’s hard to talk about something that for many of us has become so personal.

I believe that Jesus spoke about money more than anything else because money has become our security and our hope. It is one thing to come to church on a Sunday and put a Christian sticker on your car. It is a whole other story to have Jesus as your security, as your cornerstone and as your hope for the future. Nothing says you trust Jesus with your present and with your future more than living a life of being financially generous.

When you are willing to let money flow through you like it has no hold on you that will speak volumes to people that have placed their full Trust in Money. It’s kind of ironic that on our currency it says “In God we trust.” I wonder if the people that designed our currency didn’t put “In God we trust” on our money to remind us not to put our trust in money, but in God.

Jesus was passionate about the topic of money because Jesus is passionate about you. Different people will struggle with different things but every single one of us get given the opportunity to make decisions with our money. The decisions you make with your check book are the ones that speak the loudest.

You have heard the phrase “Put your money where your mouth is” right? Now there is a phrase even an atheist will understand! It means that when you are really serious about something you will be willing to bring your money into the situation. It’s impossible to be passionate about Jesus and not make Him your book keeper! The problem is that nobody wants to have a guy be in charge of their finances that has “If you lose your life you will find it” as a mission statement on their business card. If someone were to look into your bank account or your credit card statement and see how you spent your money, would they know you are a follower of Jesus?

There is an incredible story in Luke about a generous woman who had just lost her husband but continued to live a life of generosity. Luke 21:1-4

**As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. 2He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. 3“Truly I tell you,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. 4All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”**

When I asked a group of people recently to name a biblical character, outside of Jesus, that represent generosity the first person that was mentioned was this unnamed widow.

And here’s what’s amazing. According to our currency today, she gave 2/5 of a penny. And we are still telling her story millennium later. There is no way she numerically out gave everyone else that day. Jesus is not against big gifts. He doesn’t condemn the Pharisees for their gift. In fact, it’s important to note that the Kingdom of God largely grows by financially well-to-do people. This woman’s 2/5 of a penny wasn’t going to do much. So we need large, faith-filled gifts. Nothing wrong with that. But what this story shows us is God welcomes us into a life of sacrificial generosity. Because that is what truly shows where your trust and faith lie.

Just because everyone else around you is building their own little kingdom doesn’t make it right for you to do that. I’m not against prosperity or having some nice things. I believe God can, does, and wants to bless you. But what I am saying is **You cannot truly go all in for God if you cannot trust God with your money.** I believe tithing and giving could today be the number one indicator of an abiding faith in Jesus Christ. Because if He’s got your money, He’s got your heart.

That’s what Jesus says. He says, “**Where your treasure is, there your heart is.**”

And I understand, some of you are saying, enough, I’ve heard it already. Listen, if it’s a struggle for you today or this week as you read through the RLC, get it. It has been for me in the past. But **God has turned my weakness into my witness.** Let me explain.

I remember the first time I had a considerable amount of extra money. God had blessed me to be married at the age of 21 and even before that to start an Internet business selling golf headcovers. And God truly blessed our business. I was making good money, paying my way through school and even Seminary later. And I remember the first time that I had a considerable amount of money, rather than buying something important, or investing in my family’s future, or giving to God, I got greedy. And I let my money get the best of me. I remember in the first year of my marriage sneaking away to go some gambling websites. Within a few months I had wasted over $12,000. Just gone. I gambled it away. I snuck behind my family’s back to do it. Here I was, studying to be a pastor, and I wasted thousands of dollars. I don’t know which was a bigger issue: the competition of gambling or the greed of always wanting more or the lying, but I failed miserably and had to repent.

And I know firsthand that God can give you victory in an area that was once a struggle. He can redeem what was once broken and turn it into one of your biggest strengths. Since that day I remember on two different occasions feeling led by God to give more than half of our savings away. One time I really wanted to buy a pool, but instead, we decided to give it to what God is doing here and I’ve never once regretted it. Now when I take a spiritual gift test, which you too can do during Week 3 of Launch, it helps you discover your gifts and where you are strong, one of my top three gifts is generosity. In fact, for the past few years, when I do my taxes through TurboTax it always does like an audit risk check and it always tells me I have a high risk of an audit. And then the top reason it shows is because it says my charitable contributions are significantly out of proportion with my income.

I smile when it says that. That tells me if people were to look at my family’s spending, and my wife is every bit as generous as I am, then they can tell there is something different about me. I’m proud of that. God has redeemed me and made me a generous person. And I’ll tell you something else: I’ve never regretted giving any of the dollars to the church. And you never will either.

And here’s the great thing about being generous. Especially when it comes to your finances. **Your money goes places that you can’t.** And it does things that you don’t even know possible.

When you live a generous life, your money goes places. It touches people’s lives. If you look back at any of the great movements of God in this world, and that’s what we want this Red Letter Challenge to be, it starts by someone or someone’s being generous.

If you aren’t a regular giver, if you don’t tithe, I want to challenge you. In fact, the RLC will challenge you this week to become a more generous person. I hope you don’t stop short. It’s great to serve, use your hands and feet, and that’s what we were focused on last week but now we move to your money.

And it’s not just me that would issue this challenge to you. The only time God ever says that we can “Test Him” in the Bible is found in Malachi 3:10 when He says to His people:

**Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. “Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.**

And one of the things that Jesus tells His followers in Matthew 23:23 is not to neglect the tithe. If in the Old Testament we gave out of obedience to the Law, then how much more generous should we be after receiving the grace of Jesus?

So what does this look like for you today?

Well, practically it’s really easy to see once you start a budget where your money goes and what your giving looks like? I would encourage you to pray about this and see where God stirs your heart. I would encourage you to put your giving and your generosity into a mission that you believe advances God’s kingdom. I just happen to be biased and think that this family of faith-filled, big-thinking followers of Jesus Christ is doing great work for His mission and we would love to talk to you about partnering with us.

And then lastly, if you are really excited about what God is doing here and you want to join us in our mission to continue to grow our church, plant a second campus next year with Mark Crossman, and continue to pour funds into our community, I’d love for you to consider joining in our Plant and Build Initiative. Explain a bit more and invite them into Next Steps cards.

And just as we serve out of a response to God, we give because God gave to us. The most famous verse in the Bible is John 3:16: **“For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever would believe in Him would not perish but have eternal life.”** God showed His love for us by giving His Son. Jesus showed His love for us is by giving up His life. When we give, we reflect the heart and character of our God. Giving like Jesus will definitely challenge you but why not? Our normal approach to be finances is not working. So let’s be weird like Jesus.

When God gave us His only begotten Son He went broke clearing out His entire bank account so that we might be without any debt for eternity.

Hear me today. You never look more like God then when you are a giver. God is a Giver and when we start living a life of giving our biggest reward will be the fact that we take on the very nature of this awesome God we serve. There is nothing I can think of that is greater in this world then being transformed into the very image of Jesus.

**RLC Week 6 Going**

Talk about a story of something that you are really excited about…even if others aren’t…here’s mine…

About 15 years ago I was a poor, broke college student. In fact, the first night I ever met my future wife there was a large group of us that decided to go out to dinner at Perkin’s. I had no money whatsoever but in our group was my best friend Dave. And I had grown up with Dave. And Dave had some money. And Dave always over-ordered. And I knew that. So anytime I would go out to eat with Dave after he would order I was always call “Dibs” on any leftovers that Dave ordered and this would be how I would save money. I wouldn’t spend anything and I would mooch off of my friend.

So that night, sure enough, Dave’s eyes were too big for his stomach, he ordered way too much food, I called “Dibs” and like a vulture I ate up whatever was leftover from his plates. Somehow this impressed Allison. I knew in that moment she wasn’t interested in me for my money, because I had none. That’s how I knew she was the right one for me.

I say all of to tell you, back in college, I was super-cheap. And since then, my eyes have been enlightened a bit in certain areas. All of us are willing to overspend on certain things, and all of us have certain things we will never overspend on. Some of you will spend $100 or more on a pair of blue jeans. Others are content just spending $20. And that’s fine. Some of you will go out to a fancy meal and blow $100 on one meal while others are like, ya, I’ll feed my family with that number for a week. Some of you will spend hundreds of dollars every year on fireworks for the 4th of July and others of us will look at you like you are crazy and just enjoy the fireworks from our backyard while keeping the money in our bank accounts. Some of you are full-on I know it costs more to shop at Publix than it does at Aldi’s but for me it’s worth it. I love Publix. Others of you are like, are you crazy, I’ll go to Aldi’s or even Wal-Mart and I can save 30%. I think it’s fair to say that some of us are willing to overspend or underspend on certain things.

For me, I’ve changed a bit in some areas. 15 years ago, my blue jeans that I bought were Wrangler. Super cheap. But durable. Big name brand. But not expensive at all. And I was content with my jeans. At that point probably between $10-15 a pair and they were fine. Now you can probably get a pair of Wrangler’s for $20. Brett Favre. These are men’s jeans. I no longer wear Wrangler’s and before I tell you why, can we all admit that picking out the right pair of jeans, though, is actually quite a big deal, is it not? You have the comfort factor, you have to make sure they are in style, you have to make sure that it accents your curves just fine, and that when you bend over it doesn’t show anything it shouldn’t. As a guy, especially if you put on a few pounds, you want to make sure that the time they come out of the wash they are stretchable enough that they are not ridiculously uncomfortable or else you just don’t wash them. Don’t jeans get so much more comfortable the more times you wear them without washing them. They turn into sweatpants pretty much which is amazing.

Anyway, a pair of jeans can literally cost anywhere from probably $20 on the low end to hundreds of dollars, and I’m sure you can even find some in the 4 figures. And buying the right pair of jeans has changed quite a bit over the last 15 years. Fashion changes. I remember walking into a clothing store with Allison. She was looking for a pair of jeans. And the woman in the store asked Allison, how can I help you? Allison tells her that she was looking for a pair of jeans. And the woman responded with, “Do you want one with holes or without?” To which Allison responded “with.” And that in itself is quite shocking isn’t it. We’d rather buy a pair of jeans and likely we will pay more for something that has a hole in it than something that is completely put together. Nowadays I recently saw that you can purchase a pair of jeans that not only has a hole on it but it is pre-mudded. It’ll cost you likely a couple of hundred bucks or more but you can get pre-mudded, holey jeans. You know, the exact opposite of what your mom wanted you to come in looking like after playing with your friends. Now that’s in style.

And the tightness of the jeans. That’s become a factor too. Women have kind always worn tighter jeans than men. But nowadays, even men’s jeans, I’m sure you’ve noticed has gotten too be quite skinny. And if you are trendy or hipster, well, you better put on those tight jeans. This week I had a dream that I bought capri-style jeans and it made me late for church because I was shopping for them on a Sunday morning of all things. But now guys can wear capri’s and that’s apparently okay. Just as long as men never wear rompers, like that’s the cut-off right. Oh wait, that’s happening now too. Anyway, just weird stuff. I think we can all acknowledge that.

So moving back to my jeans story. I started with Wrangler, maybe a nice Levi’s pair and they were fine. Then I don’t remember how, but one day I discovered Gap and Banana Republic. They were more expensive probably in the $50 to $70 range. And it was a game-changer. I switched all my jeans to Gap or Banana Republic. For me, they were much better than Wrangler. I liked the feel of them, I was content, my life was good. I was happy.

Then something crazy happened earlier this year. I was trying on a couple of new Sunday shirts, and Allison gave me a pair of jeans. And said, “you need to try these shirts on with a pair of jeans to see what they would like.” And the brand was Joe’s Jeans. And the moment I tried on Joe’s Jeans, I could care less about the shirts I was trying, I was hooked. Now here’s the thing you need to know. Before trying on that pair of Joe’s Jeans, I was absolutely content. Gap and Banana Republic were working in my opinion just fine for me. But what Joe’s Jeans showed me is that I was wrong. There was a much better life available and it was called Joe’s Jeans.

Joe’s Jeans are more expensive. You might pay a hundred bucks for a pair of Joe’s Jeans but I’m telling you the comfort level is amazing. They feel like sweatpants and they have changed my life forever. And I wanted to share it with you all this morning because it’s made such an impact in my life and I think you all can benefit from it greatly. I also just recently invested a lot of money in the company and so I am hoping this sermon will help!

Why am I bringing this up and spending 8 minutes of your life talking about my jeans? Because I’m excited about my jeans. They’re awesome. I’m so happy. I don’t know if it will impact your buying decisions, if more of you will purchase Joe’s Jeans, I believe they make them for women too, but I just had to tell you. And I just needed to tell you the difference that one little thing has made in my life. And on a much grander scale, this is the life that Jesus invites you all into. A life to tell other people what a difference He has made in your life. Because there are a lot of people that are living this life and they are content, and they don’t know there is a better way that involves both Jesus and Joe’s Jeans.

Welcome back to Red Letter Challenge Week 6. We are on Day 34 of a 40-day challenge that will wrap up on Saturday. For 40 days, this church has decided we want to put Jesus’ words, you know those red words in your Bible’s, into practice. And we’ve done just that. We noticed that much of what Jesus invites his followers to practice fits into 5 principles, which we are calling our 5 targets that we are shooting for. Can you tell me what those 5 are?

**Being, Forgiving, Serving, Giving, Going**

And this last principle of going, for about 90% of people is the toughest. We’ve spent the last couple of weeks being God’s hands and feet. Last week we talked about giving God our hearts, which is our money and that if we are truly a Jesus follower we are generous. Jesus said where your treasure is, there your heart is. So now that we’ve given God our hands and feet, now that we’ve essentially given Him our heart, now we give him our mouth.

St. Francis of Assisi was once quoted as saying, **“Preach the Gospel, and if necessary, use words.”** It has become a very well-known and famous quote. But it’s often been used incorrectly. People will use the quote to show how important it is that we don’t just say stuff, but our actions matter. To highlight how important it is that we are God’s hands and feet. It’s easy to say something from a pulpit but does your life match up with what you are saying. And how I’ve often heard it preached is almost like service and being God’s hands and feet are superior than actually proclaiming the Gospel and using your mouth. And that was never St. Francis’ intent. It’s not at the expense of using words, preach the Gospel. It’s hey, let’s make sure we are not only being God’s hands and feet, but we are also being His mouthpiece in this world.

In fact, that is exactly what the disciple Peter says in 1 Peter 4:11. Check this out:

**11If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.**

We have the opportunity to speak the words of God to others. We also have the opportunity to serve and show people the love of Christ. Both are important and necessary.

But we struggle far more with being God’s mouthpiece and proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ than we do with serving. As we look into the Red Letters of Jesus, what I noticed is that all of His words are important, but I think it’s interesting what He says at the start and the finish of His ministry.

In Matthew 4, after being baptized, this is when Jesus publicly begins His ministry. His first words recorded after starting His ministry are “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.” God is announcing to all of us, through Jesus, that we have the opportunity to join Him in His kingdom. And it happens through repentance and acknowledging that we are a sinner and that Jesus is our Savior. After that acknowledgement, and that’s how we spent the first couple of weeks in the Red Letter Challenge, being with Jesus, and receiving His grace for our past, present, and future, the very next recorded words of Jesus are this. “Come follow me,” and that’s what the Red Letter Challenge is all about is inviting you into a life of following Jesus and representing Him well in this world. He says, “Follow me, and I will send you to fish for people.” Other translations say, “I will make you fishers of men.” Nothing wrong with fishing for fish. But Jesus says, “I want you to fish for people.” If you listen to what I say and do what I ask you to do you, Jesus says, you are going to catch people. You are going to live a fulfilled life. You are going to make a difference.

And so Jesus gives us this call to follow after Him and His ultimate intent is that they would be sent. Our last principle is going. There is movement to what Jesus is doing from the very beginning. A life spent being with Jesus will result in a life of going. **You cannot be with Jesus and stay put**. That’s not the life He wants you to have. Your being will result in going. He will lead you places and when He does, He sends you with a specific purpose that when you go, I want you to catch people. I want you to influence lives. And you will do that by being my hands and feet, my being generous and touching people’s lives that you may never know about, and also by speaking and proclaiming the fact that the kingdom of heaven is near for all people. That they too can be a part of this eternal life.

Jesus comes in with this mission to grow His disciples in order that they would be sent. And during His ministry, He would send them. But then they’d come back and learn. This is the rhythm of a disciple of Jesus. Learn from Him. Be sent. Go. Teach. Tell. Proclaim. Heal.

Just as Jesus began His ministry by talking of the importance of being sent with a purpose, what’s amazing, and I didn’t see this until recently, is the pattern I see in each of the 4 Gospel accounts and in the book of Acts, which are Jesus’ last recorded words. It’s amazing. Every Gospel ends very similarly, and if that’s the case we have to draw a conclusion from that. That what Jesus says at the end truly does matter.

Check it out:

* 1. Matthew 28:19-20 which is what we call the Great Commission, not the Great Suggestion, Jesus says, “**19Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”**
	2. Mark 16:15: **He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.**
	3. Luke 24:47: **and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things.**
	4. John 20:21: **“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”**
	5. Acts 1:8: And then his very last words before His ascension: **8But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”**

Jesus spends all this time with them so that they would be fully equipped and now sent. He sends them with a purpose, to go, to preach/proclaim His message and as He says in Acts, to be His witnesses in this world.

This feels like a daunting task for many of us. But I’m going to tell you today that the reason it feels daunting is because we overcomplicate it and put too much pressure on ourselves. I have good news for you today that being Jesus’ witness and proclaiming the Gospel is actually far easier than you even realized.

If you had to give a speech on a particular topic in school, you would want to go into that knowing as much as possible. Similarly, many of us get caught up and think that before I go out and tell someone about Jesus, I need to know everything about Him. And I would say it is good to know as much as we can about Jesus. Absolutely. But let me tell you this:

**Jesus never invites us into a relationship where we understand Him perfectly. He invites us into a relationship where He trust Him completely.**

So what does this look like? What does that practically mean for me Pastor Zach? Here’s how I would answer that. As simple as what I did with Joe’s Jeans earlier, where I was real and I talked about the difference those jeans made in my life, what God calls us to be is be His witnesses. And what is a witness? A witness is someone that speaks truth about what they saw. And going further, the difference that, in our case, Jesus has made in our lives. I truly believe it is that simple. It’s cool if you know a lot about Jesus and are able to answer some theological questions, I enjoy conversations around eschatology and the two natures of Jesus, the gaius majestaticum and the gaius idiomaticum, but that’s not going to save anyone or convince anyone that Jesus is God. **People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care for them.** Far more important than knowing everything about Jesus, which by the way is impossible, I’m still stuck with questions that I have to answer I don’t know and that’s the best answer you can give sometimes, or I’m not sure, let’s find out together. Here’s the best thing question you can answer: What has Jesus done for you and what difference has He made in your life? Here’s my life before Jesus and here’s my life now. That can be powerful and that’s all it takes and I’ll prove it to you with one modern-day example and then walking you through some verses in the Bible that prove it as well.

There has been a lot of chatter in the last decade about the reliability of eyewitness accounts. From a jury’s perspective, eyewitness testimony is one of the most persuasive forms of evidence.

The introduction of eyewitness testimony has been shown to increase conviction rates dramatically. Jurors place more weight on eyewitness testimony than on many other types of evidence, including fingerprint, handwriting, or polygraph evidence. Did you catch that? That means that a jury will give more credence to a personal testimony than they will of factual scientific evidence. Crazy, right?

I was reading a story about a man in California, his name was Kash Register, no joke, that was convicted of murder based on an eyewitness account from a 19-year-old that lived near the crime scene. There was extremely weak physical evidence, but the case turned almost entirely on this 19-year old eyewitness’ testimony. Kash proclaimed his innocence the entire time, but ended up being convicted and assigned to a life in prison. In 11 parole hearings over the next two decades he continued to proclaim his innocence. For 33 years he was incarcerated, he says, for a crime that he didn’t commit. If you want to get out on parole, it doesn’t look so good on you if you never accept responsibility for your crime. And so it was back to prison.

How do you get justice, how do you free someone who has been falsely convicted of a crime? Almost every occasion in our day today is through DNA testing, but that didn’t become routine until the 1990’s and this crime had predated the 90’s.

And Kash spent more than 34 years in prison all the while maintaining his innocence.

Finally, a sister of the 19-year old woman who gave the eyewitness account, out of curiosity looked up the man’s name in the prison system. When she saw he was still in prison, she went on a quest to find out the truth, which meant exposing her sister’s eyewitness testimony. She had had a sneaking suspicion decades earlier that her sister especially had lied in order to get this man convicted.

When she had tried to speak up 30 years earlier about this, she was encouraged not to. But now there was no holding her back. She told the truth and what she saw and believed to be true, and wouldn’t you know it, based on her eyewitness account 34 years later, Kash Register was allowed to walk free. Wrongful conviction, especially when it ruins your life for decades is brutal. I don’t know how you come back from that.

But what’s fascinating about this story is that an eyewitness account is what convicted him and an eyewitness account is what freed him. In our court system, we are shown how important and powerful your story and your testimony can be.

So now let’s relate this in spiritual terms that hopefully all of us can understand.

Romans 3:10 says, “**There is no one righteous, not even one**.” It would go on later to say there is no one who does good. And then in Romans 3:23 it says that all have fallen short of the glory of God and sinned. Three chapters later in Romans 6:23 it would say, “That the wages of sin is death.” Which essentially means that everyone in this world is walking around with a death sentence. Before you met Jesus, you were walking around with a death sentence. No one righteous, no one good, wages of sin is death. You are a sinner, you will die for that sin.

Many people are walking around these days and they are content. They think they are good. I’m a good person. She was a good person. He lived a good life. It’s all good. And they are content. But I’m here to tell you they are wearing Wrangler’s. There is a better life. You don’t have to walk around with a death sentence anymore. And here’s why…that same verse Romans 6:23 says, “23**For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life inChrist Jesus our Lord.”**

The bad news is that we are all walking around with death sentences. The good news is that those who have received God’s gift of grace have their death sentence removed. We are guilty, but we are freed by Jesus and His sacrifice at the cross. So now that we are freed, we are called to free others. **God has rescued us to be rescuers of others.**

After hearing what Jesus has done for us and how He’s removed that death sentence from us, we can’t help but want to free others. When something or someone has made such a difference in your life, you want others to experience that for themselves. When you’ve been rescued, you want to tell others of your Rescuer. And you do that by telling your story. By sharing your testimony. You have a testimony that can help free others.

When you combine the Gospel, the Good News of what Jesus has done for others, and pair it with your story, I’m telling you it’ll remove death sentences off of people. No longer will the wages of sin mean death for them, but instead receiving the gift of God will mean eternal life with Jesus. The devil wants you and others to walk around in bondage knowing that death is what awaits you. But He will be overcome.

The most powerful verse when it comes to the importance of your testimony is in Revelation 12:11 which says, that the enemy will be overcome, how? Check this out:

**They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony!**

We remove the death sentences of the enemy how? By the blood of the Lamb. That’s the blood of Jesus that has already been shed. He’s already paid the price necessary, He’s paid for the crime, the debt has been covered, and now He invites us into joining Him by sharing our testimony. The blood of the Lamb (already done) with the word of our testimony. This is what Jesus calls His followers to do. **The biggest impact you can make for God’s Kingdom is by partnering with Jesus and sharing your story.**

Your story matters. Far too many people are walking around content, not knowing they have a death sentence awaiting them. But the Good News is that Jesus has already removed it. Will you tell someone?

Because there is no better day to start than today. We don’t know what’s ahead, this life is precious, and what God is calling us into is a life that we can step into today. You can make a difference today.

And I don’t know if it’s coincidence or not, but today just happens to be the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther nailed 95 theses on the door of the Wittenburg Chapel in Germany to declare the very thing that we are talking about today. That God, through His great grace, has removed the sting of death, and all of us can be welcomed into a life following after Him.

What God is calling us to be is very much like Martin Luther in his day. To stand up and say, there’s a problem. Too many people are content with the way things are but they have a death sentence hanging over them. But I can help. Let me tell you about Jesus and what He’s done and how He’s made a difference in my life.

At the heart of the Red Letter Challenge, we challenge people to live more like Jesus calls us to live so that we can represent Him truly, because if people really met Jesus, they’d fall in love with Him. You get the opportunity to go, to proclaim, and to share your testimony. I’m praying for boldness and courage for you, that through your testimony, many would come to know the name of Jesus and walk in the freedom that He’s already won for them.