

THE WHY BEHIND

THE RED LETTER CHALLENGE

Why does the world around us and the life we live not look anything like the reality Jesus talked about? Why is there no significant difference between the lives of those who call themselves Christians and the rest of the world? What kind of witness can we be in this world if we simply look the same as everyone else? If we are a poor representation of who God is, then what needs to change? What can we do? Rather than shrugging it off, isn't it time to change people's perceptions about the followers of Jesus Christ?

These questions kept bothering me. I kept thinking there has to be something we can do about this. That's when something so simple came to me – something so simple it was genius. What if we take the words of Jesus and actually put them into practice? If we could actually do this, surely that would change people's perceptions about those who follow Jesus!

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 I actually stole this idea from Jesus Himself.

Jesus finishes the Sermon on the Mount, the greatest sermon ever preached, by saying this in Matthew 7:24-27:

"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."

Jesus is saying, "If you want your house to stand up, 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. Taking Jesus' words, the ones that are written in red letters in your Bibles, and putting 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!

I looked and looked for something that gave followers of Jesus clear, practical action steps to take what He said and then put those words into practice. There are many great books and resources out there, but I couldn't find anything that organizes the literal words that Jesus spoke and then issues a clear challenge based on that teaching.

I decided this idea needed to be tested. At the time, I was a young pastor in the first full year of a small new church plant. We were looking for ways to get involved in the community and advance the Kingdom of God in our area. Personally, I was trying to awaken the members of my church. You see, at the time, my church was made up mostly of long-time Christians. These were people who had believed in God most of their lives. They were used to church and had gotten into patterns of being surrounded only by Christian friends and serving three or four days a week (but always at the church building). The biggest way they stepped out of their comfort zones was ushering during a church service. Really? People who were forty, fifty, even sixty years into their faith and the way they were being “stretched” by God was by showing someone to a seat, passing an offering plate, and counting heads! My five-year old could have done that - well, as long as the counting didn’t go into the hundreds!

However, they were open to trying something new and they were excited about all of the possibilities that might come from it. They were especially eager to see how this Challenge would work. They were committed to doing whatever it took to reach our community, and especially those who didn't believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

That's when we implemented the Red Letter Challenge at our church. What would it look like for a whole church, new to the area but excited about the future, to literally practice the words of God together? The results were amazing and lives were changed! The community was changed! The individuals who took part were challenged to new heights in their relationship with Christ, and ultimately our church grew as well. God did incredible things through the Challenge!

People were doing things they never thought were possible. And because we were doing it together, they knew they had the support and accountability of everyone else in the church. We had so many amazing things happen during that first Challenge that we decided to do it again the following year!

I've been blessed by this Challenge. Those who have been through it have been blessed by it. Our church has been blessed by it. Most importantly, our communities were blessed by it and we are changing the perception in our area of who Jesus Christ is. We know this workbook you have in your hands right now is going to bless you and many others if you take this Challenge seriously.

People who are new to the faith have often asked me, “How do I follow Jesus? What am I supposed to do?” Even people who have believed and followed Jesus for much of their life struggle to answer that question. As I explored Christ's words, I found that He asked His followers to do many things, but He spent a good portion of His time focused on five main principles.

1 Being **2** Forgiving **3** Serving **4** Giving **5** Going

We re-organized the Challenge to introduce each of these five principles over the first five days. The following five weeks then focus on each of these principles for one full week. And what you have in your hands right now is the complete 40-Day Red Letter Challenge!

By putting God's words into practice, you will find the life God has made for you! You will be led to spend more time with the God who loves you. You will serve and sacrifice more than you ever have before. You will forgive people you never thought you would be able to. (That person may even be yourself!) You will become a more generous person. You will be more bold and courageous in what you say and in how you live. And through the entire Challenge, you will celebrate and enjoy the life God has given you!

Another thing that will probably happen is you will fail! Sorry for the harsh words. But I've never done the Challenge perfectly. There's been a day I missed here and there or an idea that was too hard for me for a particular day. If this happens to you, I invite you to write down your thoughts for that day and why you struggled. You will find that perhaps you are stronger in some areas than others in your faith.

Being a follower of Jesus is not always pretty, and sometimes we mess up. We have forgiveness for those times and God urges us to come back to Him and keep following after Him. Whether you are experiencing success or failure, I want to encourage you not to get frustrated. Just keep moving on. What we are hoping to create is a new habit in your life. We don't want you to just do what God says for 40 days and then never think about it again. I hope the practice of implementing Jesus' words in your life will become a daily occurrence for you. Habit formation isn't an overnight process. It takes a while. But you have to start somewhere, so let's start with His words and embark together on the Red Letter Challenge!

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