

Red Letter Lessons: #1 - Worry

Big Idea:

Worry can be avoided when we strike the correct balance of trust and action.

Verses for Reference:

Matthew 6:25-34

Luke 14:25-33

Devotional:

Guilty, guilty as charged. I worry about lots of really insignificant things. I've been guilty of worrying about things that haven't yet happened. I've worried about things that I later discovered were much larger in my mind than reality. I've worried about money, work, relationships, my kids, my wife, I can worry with the best of them. If you have a pulse, you've likely spent your fair share of time worrying as well. The question becomes, "What's the balance?" What's the balance between cautious decision making and worry? What's the balance between forethought and worry? What's the balance between thinking things through and worry?

Balance is the key. In Luke 14 Jesus sheds some light on what this kind of balance might look like.

Luke 14:25-33 says, "A large crowd was following Jesus. He turned around and said to them, "If you want to be my disciple, you must, by comparison, hate everyone else—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple. "But don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it? Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of money, and then everyone would laugh at you. They would say, 'There's the person who started that building and couldn't afford to finish it!' "Or what king would go to war against another king without first sitting down with his counselors to discuss whether his army of 10,000 could defeat the 20,000 soldiers marching against him? And if he can't, he will send a delegation to discuss terms of peace while the enemy is still far away. So you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own."

There are some key phrases that are used here: "count the cost", "calculating the cost", "sitting down with advisors to discuss". Each of these phrases can help you and I hone in on this balance I referred to earlier.

- What's the difference between counting the cost and worry?
- What's the difference between calculating a decision and worry?
- What's the difference between discussion and worry?

When does the former lead into the latter?

Allow me to suggest that the difference between the former and the latter has everything to do with trust and action.

Trust:

In Matthew 6:32 Jesus says, "*For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.*"

Worry, at its source is about a lack of trust. We worry because we don't really trust that God will provide. We worry that He won't provide for _____ fill in the blank for yourself. Our kids, our well-being, our bills, our marriage, etc. God is fully aware of what's needed in our lives. If we truly trust, we'll discover that worry has less of a draw.

Action:

Secondly, we begin to find a better balance when we take action. Notice that Jesus' examples in Luke all implied that some level of action would be taken.

If you count or calculate the cost and determine that now's not the time, we don't need to worry, we just need to continue preparing for when we are ready. There's nothing to worry or stress about anymore because a decision has been made, "Now's not the time for action". In a sense, after counting the cost, our inaction can become action. Where there is trust, there can be action even if it's not the type of action we were originally hoping for.

Worry becomes paralyzing when we fear that God will not provide. If we have done our part, God is faithful to do His part.

Worry prohibits worship and we are called to worship, first and foremost we were created to worship. Be encouraged and keep moving forward.

Questions for Reflection:

- What do you worry about?
- Do you ever feel paralyzed by your worry?
- Can you identify that your worry is really sourced in a lack of trust?
- Can you get into the idea that "inaction with counsel" is really a form of action?

Red Letter Lessons: #2 - Purity

Big Idea:

What percentage of following Jesus are you comfortable with?

Verses for Reference:

Matthew 5:8

Psalm 24:3-4

Psalm 51:10

Devotional:

Matthew 5 records for us what's known as the "Sermon on the Mount". In other words, Jesus' teaching while standing on a hillside. Creatively named right? As He saw people gathering around, Jesus took the opportunity to drop some knowledge on the masses.

The kingdom of God was coming and it was different than the kingdoms of this earth. It functioned differently. It operated on a different set of standards. It valued different things than worldly kingdoms valued. Much of what He spoke during this time was pretty extreme to the ears of the listeners.

- The meek will inherit the earth.
- The merciful will be shown mercy.
- If you're persecuted, the Kingdom of God will belong to you.

It all sounded counter-intuitive. It sounded opposite of what the natural response to these situations should have been. In the midst of this teaching Jesus says, *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."*

This statement would have been especially ear popping because everyone knew that to get ahead in life you sometimes had to do things on the "down-low". Sometimes what a situation required was a little, "backroom dealing", perhaps what was needed was some "sketchy conversations" in order to move things along. Everyone knew that this is how the kingdom functioned.

For Jesus to now say that what was most important was to be "pure in heart" seemed outlandish. How was anything going to get done if we're pure in heart? There's a question that we should answer as well. Do you really believe that things can get done if you are 100% on the up and up?

Yes, I know that you believe in Jesus, I know that you've committed your life to Him but have you really made the decision to be pure of heart? The definition of the word "pure" is, *"not mixed or adulterated with any other substance or material"*. Can you and I really describe our lives as a life that 100% consist of the things of God. What else have we allowed to be mixed in there? Perhaps we've mixed a little of our own ingredients into the equation.

- We've mixed in our perspectives on business.
- We've mixed in our perspectives on leadership.
- We've mixed in our perspectives on decision making.
- We've mixed in our perspectives on various ethnicities.
- We've mixed in our perspectives on conflict management.

To be pure is to be 100% unadulterated. No mixture, no matter how small the percentage is our calling as Christ followers. That's a tall order and certainly not one that I have yet achieved but nevertheless that's what we're called towards.

Psalm 24:3-4 "Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god."

Psalm 51:10 "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."

Perhaps our prayer should be for renewal. That God would renew a right spirit in us. That He would help us identify those impure mixtures that exist within our lives. Be encouraged and keep moving forward.

Questions for Reflection:

- What have you mixed in to your relationship with God?
- What of this mixture have you always assumed was necessary to "getting things done"?
- What would be the "real time" effects of you making a commitment to truly be pure of heart? How would it effect your family life, work life, social life?

Red Letter Lessons: #3 - Purpose

Big Idea:

There's only one throne of your heart and Jesus refuses to share it with anyone or anything.

Verses for Reference:

John 14:6

Isaiah 7:14

Isaiah 9:6

Zechariah 9:9

Psalms 22:16-18

Devotional:

The word "messiah" is a noun and it means, "the promised deliverer of the Jewish nation prophesied in the Hebrew Bible."

The Old Testament is full of prophecies and references to Jesus' purpose as the Messiah but the "*the peace de resistance*" is found in Isaiah.

Isaiah 53:3-7 (NLT) says, "*He was despised and rejected —a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care. Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all. He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth.*"

God sent Jesus to be our Messiah. You may be thinking, "Hey man, I don't need a messiah. I didn't do anything wrong." Don't miss this, Isaiah says, "*All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own.*"

Because of our human nature we were born into sin. Because of the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden, you and I, who were created to be like God, we were created in the image of God, have found ourselves separated from God. The only way we could be made right in God's eyes, without Jesus our Messiah, is to live a perfect life. Any takers?

"Well I'm not a bad person". It's likely that you're not a bad person but that's not the question at hand. The question at hand is, "Are you a perfect person?"

- Have you ever thought about something inappropriate?

- Have you ever said something inappropriate?
- Have you ever, even in the quietness of your heart, harbored anger?

If you have a pulse, you're not perfect.

Whether we think so or not, we are in need of a Messiah. We're in need of a savior and that's the role that Jesus came to fill. In the church we assign words like, "propitiation, atonement and reparation" to this idea but the underlying concept is that you and I can't be right with God without the sacrifice that Jesus made for us on the cross as our Messiah.

If we can begin to come to grips with the fact that we need a Messiah, that we need a Savior, what flows from that is the question, "Where do I look for that Messiah?" My suggestion is of course, "look to Jesus" but I wonder where else we might look for a savior?

In other words, do we sometimes try to figure out a way to save ourselves by bypassing Jesus? Do we sometimes look to other sources as our messiah? If we're not careful, we forget to attach "Jesus" to "Messiah" and we start to assume that lots of different things or people or relationships can serve as our messiahs?

Listen, there is one Messiah that can save you and I for eternity and can bring us into right relationship with God and that's Jesus. Jesus only.

There is only one throne of your heart and Jesus refuses to share it with anyone or anything.

Questions for Reflection:

- Where or to whom do you look for a messiah? Work? Money? Relationships? Status?
- Have you identified Jesus as your Messiah or do you simply love Jesus?
- What's the difference between knowing Jesus in your head and knowing Jesus in your heart?

Red Letter Lessons: #4 - Process

Big Idea:

Spiritual development is a process.

Verses for Reference:

Luke 9:20

Luke 9:23

Luke 22:33-34

Luke 22:60-61

Devotional:

It's in these three verses that we are given a picture of the process that each of us as Christ followers is called to take.

Stage one is our acknowledgement of Jesus as Messiah.

Jesus says in Luke 9:20, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" This question is posed to Peter and a few of the other disciples of Jesus'. Peter, the most vocal of the group answers with, "God's Messiah". Great answer Peter.

This is probably the portion of the process that you and I are most familiar with. Acknowledging that Jesus is who He says He is. Maybe for you this portion of your journey was completed as a child. maybe for you it was later in life but you've accepted Jesus as your Messiah, as your Savior.

Stage two flows from this first stage and is known as sanctification.

Sanctification is simply the term that denotes the idea of being set apart or consecrating something. In the context of this topic, it's about purifying us or freeing us from sin. If you've been around the church block a time or two you might have heard this process called, "Making Jesus the Lord of your life".

There's a massive difference between making Jesus your Messiah or Savior and allowing Him to be the Lord of your life.

Jesus must have sensed the confusion in Peter's answer because He launches into a more detailed description of what it means to follow Him. In Luke 9:23 He says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

That's lordship, that's Jesus filling not just the role of Messiah or Savior but also filling the role of director and producer. It's at this point in the journey that we step out of the way and allow Jesus to start calling the shots in our daily life.

Stage three gets tough. This is the stage where our faith gets tested.

In Luke 22:33-34 Peter is given fair warning that things are about to get nasty. Jesus is coming to the end of His earthly journey and the screws are being tightened not only on Him but on His followers as well.

Jesus says, "Peter, you're going to cave on me. Things are going to get dicey and soon we will see what you're really about." This is our lives on a daily basis right? Every day our faith is tested...

- In how we respond to our kids in the midst of frustration.
- In how we react to criticism.
- In the way we handle a missed assignment at work.
- In the way we criticize our boss when they're not around.
- In what we look at on the internet.
- In what we think in the quietness of our own minds.

This is a normal part of our faith journey and it's an important part of our faith building process. Without these difficult moments we will never grow. My older son is in the throws of his driver education classes. He's been driving my wife and I around for months now, learning the rules of the road, the do's and don'ts. As weird as this sounds, I need him to be in some dicey driving scenarios right now. I need him to experience some quick decision moments in order to prepare him for the real world of driving. Driving is more than what's learned in the classroom or textbook. In the same way our faith is more than what we hear presented in a sermon or daily devotional. We need the real world experience of having our faith tested. It's from those tests that we grow and mature as believers.

The final stage is crucial to our longevity as Christ followers. The final stage is about redemption.

It's in this stage that we allow God to pick us up, dust us off and help us move back into the process. Here's a shocker: you and I are going to screw up from time to time. No one is perfect. Peter paints a fine example of this truth in Luke 22:60-61. He blew it. Just like Jesus predicted, he blew it big time. He pretended that he didn't even know who Jesus was.

The beginning of verse 61 has always interested me, "*The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.*" I've often wondered what that look must have felt like to Peter. Shame, embarrassment, it must have been a powerful feeling because the Scripture says that Peter went away and wept bitterly.

We've been there too right? After a particularly poor demonstration of patience with our kids, the morning after a night of poor choices, the moments after a less than godly response to a co-worker. If you're human, you've experienced the pain and conviction our sinful choices bring us.

The good news for Peter is that God chose to redeem him. And God chooses to redeem you and I as well. Spiritual development is a process. Our job is to discover where we are in the process and to figure out how to move into the next stage. Don't settle for the "fire insurance" that stage one offers. Don't ignore the rough edges that God wants to knock off in stage two. Don't fear the tough times of stage three, trust that God will bring you through. Push yourself towards the never-ending process of stage four where you strive for Christ-likeness, fall short and God picks you up, brushes you off and points the way yet again. Be encouraged and keep moving forward.

Questions for Reflection:

- In which stage do you currently find yourself in?
- Do you think you've settled for that stage? If so, why?
- What scares you about moving on in the process of spiritual development?

Red Letter Lessons: #5 - Everything

Big Idea:

All you have is all Jesus needs.

Verses for Reference:

Matthew 14:13-21

2 Corinthians 5:20

Devotional:

Sometimes we forget what our purpose is really all about. If you are a Jesus follower then you have been given a job. In Paul's letter to the church at Corinth he states the job of the Christ follower like this, *"So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!"*

We are called to be God's ambassadors. We're called to repeatedly shout out the phrase, "Come back to God!" To friends, to family, to co-workers, to neighbors, to anyone who will listen. But what is it that prevents us from doing this? Why do we often shy away from our job? Why do we get into a relationship with Jesus and then keep it all to ourselves? Why do we sign up for the job and then refuse to complete the job requirements?

I'm sure there are multiple reasons that we refuse or fail to complete our job as a Christ followers but there's one that seems to rise to the surface more quickly than others.

Perhaps what paralyzes us the most is our false belief that what we have at our disposal isn't enough to get the job done. It's no different than an assignment given to you in the workplace. You're tasked with a project and then not given all the information and resources needed so you feel handicapped in your ability to complete the job.

Here's the problem though, for this job you have been given everything you need. There's a great example of this in Scripture where the disciples are tasked with feeding a huge crowd of people. Jesus had been teaching and like normal a large crowd had gathered. The day was winding down and the people were hungry. Sensing a potential uprising if food was not delivered, the disciples quickly suggested that Jesus dismiss the crowd to have their needs met elsewhere.

Jesus' response to their plea of dismissing the crowd must have been jaw dropping, *"That isn't necessary - you feed them."*

"Oh okay Jesus, let me go ahead and pull out the buffet from the back room and we'll get this going. What in the world was Jesus talking about? How were the disciples supposed to feed all of these people?

Jesus' suggestion must have sent them into a frenzy. Scouring the crowd trying to gather up as much as they could from the people. They likely felt discouragement as they returned with just five loaves and two fish. Their discouragement probably turned to complete confusion when Jesus instructed them to have the crowd sit down on the grass to prepare to eat.

What Jesus offered next is exactly what He offers to you and I today. "Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked up toward heaven, and blessed them." Imagine in the same way that Jesus can take all that you have, lift them towards Heaven and bless them.

Far too often we live our lives assuming that nothing can be done with our meager offering. All I know how to do is take care of kids. All I know is how to sweep up. All I know how to do is crunch numbers. All I know how to do is listen. Whatever you "all" is, is exactly what Jesus needs. Jesus modeled for the disciples what He longs to do in your life as well.

What do you have? Give it to Him and get out of the way. Be encouraged and keep moving forward.

Questions for Reflection:

- What do you have that you haven't yet given over to God?
- Why have you not yet given that to Him?
- What have you always assumed wasn't worthy to give to Him?
- What is God calling you to? What has He already given you to accomplish that mission?