

The **RED** Letters

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(Red Letter series #1) Mark 1:14-15 (Also Luke 15 for the Red Letter Reading) **LETTERS OF REPENTANCE**

“I like Jesus, but not the church.” I’m sure we’ve all heard those words, or something to that effect. Maybe you’ve even said them? It’s still sort of the “in” thing to be “spiritual” but not religious - connected to Jesus, somehow – sort of, but not the church. But Who is the Jesus people say they like?

Sometimes you hear people say in religious discussions: “**My** Jesus wouldn’t say that.” Or “**My** Jesus isn’t like that.” Really? “**MY** Jesus?” Folks, do you really have the right to create Jesus in your own image, or is it instead our privilege to get to know the Jesus Who actually came into this world for us? Our culture has created many images of Jesus over the years. For instance at Christmas a lot of folks have an image of Jesus that looks something like this:

Slide: Little Lord Jesus meek and mild

Little Lord Jesus meek and mild (somehow glowing in a dark stable). And of course, He did come as a little baby, but unfortunately a lot of folks try to **keep Him there**: little, meek and mild, unable to do much for you or to challenge you to do life differently. Some have this image of Jesus:

Slide: Symbolic Jesus (sort of a girlyman if you can say such a thing) By the way, Jesus worked as a carpenter, possibly a stone mason, for around 20 years before He began His public ministry. Just saying...

Slide: Jesus the Good Shepherd

Slide: The Jesus who suffered and died for us on the cross

Slide: The Jesus who stands at the door and knocks

And of course my personal favorite:

Slide: Plastic Jesus. (who basically agrees with everything you want to do)

So who is Jesus really? A while back a lot of us wore the WWJD bracelet.

Slide: WWJD

“What would Jesus do?” And as we evaluate our behavior and our choices, that’s a good question to ask. But of course, a lot of people try to hijack that phrase for their own purposes, so how about this?

Slide: HDYKWJWDIYDKWJD?

How do you know what Jesus would do if you don’t know what Jesus did? Or, if you don’t know **what He said**? So, what better way to discover who Jesus really is than through His own words? Not what people or politicians say about Him... Not my opinion – your opinion... Jesus’ own words. Printing the words of Jesus in red has been a feature of Bible translations for over 100 years... Our eyes notice the **Red Letters** as we read through the Bible, but what if we just kind of stuck to the **Red Letters** and worked our way all through the New Testament? Well, some years ago I decided to do that. I studied every Red Letter in the Bible and organized them into categories that seem to go together. For the last few weeks I’ve been working through all that material again, and I’ll be preaching on one category each Sunday all the way through the summer. I also developed a small group study for each section. Feel free to pick one or more up and start a neighborhood study – or perhaps something with your fellow employees. It would also work well for family devotions. I pray simply that the “**Red Letters**” might become the “read letters.”

So let’s get to it. The first Red Letters I want to look at are

Slide: Letters of Repentance

The Bible says:

Slide: “Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God: ‘**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!**’” (Mark 1:14–15 CSB)

What time has come? THE time. Folks, do you realize how arrogant that statement is if Jesus is not the Christ, the Son of God who came into this world to save us from our sins? We’re going to run into this again and again with the Red Letters of Jesus. He knows exactly who He is. And He wants you to know as well. Paul put it this way:

Slide: “When the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” (Galatians 4:4–5 CSB)

Again - **THE** Time. The time when God would reveal His plan to buy mankind back from sin and Satan; the time when Jesus would stand in the way of the righteous wrath of God against all the wrong that’s ever been done, and be punished for it instead of us so that we could be forgiven. That’s the Good News that Jesus came to proclaim and that He wants you to believe. But first, He commands you to do something quite foreign to people today. His message was not “do your own thing”, but “give up your own thing and do God’s thing.” Both John the Baptist and Jesus entered onto their respective stages with the word “**Repent.**” And folks, just as we have different images of Jesus, so we have different images of some of His **Red Letters**. For instance, in the days of Martin Luther the Roman Catholic Church, based on an inaccurate Latin translation of the Bible, was teaching that “repentance” meant “**doing penance**” – doing works to make up for your sins, as though it ever could. Martin Luther discovered the original Greek word was: “Metanoiete”. Literally: “Change your mind.” Change the way you think about life. Would “**your** Jesus” ask you to do that? Absolutely. He’s going to do it over and over and over again in all of His **Red Letters**. And we need to understand that right up front: when Jesus comes into your world, you have no choice but to change your mind about life. Because the letters of this world are not the letters of Jesus. What the world has presented to you as Truth is not the Real Truth. And if you’ve created Jesus in your own image, you’re going to be disappointed and disillusioned and despairing when your fake Jesus is exposed as just something that rested in your own shirt pocket. The Real Jesus is Bigger. Much BIGGER! The real Jesus is going to challenge you like no other, and He will comfort you like no other. In this series, we’ll read letters of hope and letters of humility, letters of judgment and letters of reward, letters of prayer and prophecy AND letters that will rock your world!

So are you ready? Are you ready to say with the Psalmist:

Slide: “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me; lead me in the everlasting way.” (Psalm 139:23–24 CSB)

It’s not easy. It’s not natural to expose your life to scrutiny, to want to be examined so that you can change what’s wrong. But that’s what the **real** Jesus requires.

I like the story of the woman who noticed a plaque at a craft sale that read:

Slide: “Prayer Changes Things”

She liked that phrase and the way it was put together on the plaque, so she bought it and took it home and hung it prominently on a wall in their house. One day she noticed that it no longer hung on the wall. She puzzled over that for a while and finally asked her husband about it. He admitted: *“Yeah, I did that. I took it down.”*

“Why?” she said, *“Don’t you believe in prayer? Don’t you believe prayer changes things?”*

“Well, yes.” He said. *“I just don’t like change.”*

And unfortunately, we’re going to see that as Jesus shares His **Red Letters**. That kind of response is going to be all too common – maybe especially from church people...

So, how about you? Are you willing to change your mind, change your heart and change your life? Are you really? For instance most people would say, “Yes, I’d like to let go of my PRIDE.” Would you really? Wouldn’t you miss that feeling of superiority that comes over you once in a while? Wouldn’t you miss feeling a little bit richer than, prettier than, smarter than, better than... some of the people around you? We say we want to part with our pride but it feels kind of good once in a while to be superior, doesn’t it? Even if it’s only in our own minds?

How about ANGER? Wouldn’t some of us miss the adrenaline rush that accompanies our raging fits of ANGER? Wouldn’t some of us miss the excitement of our sexual fantasies if we were to let go of LUST?

Giving up GREED **sounds** good until you get practical about it and it cuts into your buying patterns. Do you really want to let go of that? Giving up GLUTTONY sounds like a good idea, except some of us are going out for brunch – and we want to get our money’s worth at that buffet table... How about SLOTH? We really should get the lawn mowed, or the laundry folded or the homework done, but there’s a game on...and look at that cute kitten on Facebook!

Folks, in addition to the fact that Satan is after you, do you know what one of the biggest obstacles to change in your life is? It’s you! Because even though your sins and flaws cause you and others enormous pain, you’ve had ‘em for a long time. They’re worn out and ready to be thrown away...but you really don’t want them to go away. The truth is you’re kind of used to them. They’re like an old pair of shoes. You don’t want to let ‘em go. The fact is that your sinful self doesn’t really want to repent...to walk away from them and never come back to them ever again.

But folks, do the cost analysis. What are those sins costing you? For instance, how about your **pride**? If you continue to make your spouse or your family feel small... If you’re always one-upping everybody... What toll is that going to take on your relationships in the future? How is your pride going to affect your spiritual life -where you keep saying, *“I don’t need You God, I don’t need Your grace, I don’t need Your salvation. I can do it all myself.”* Do you see how **eternally expensive** that sin can be when you hold onto it – when you don’t change your mind about it and ask God to remove it?

How about **anger**? What is your anger costing you in life? How many more rages and angry words do you think your spouse can take before she walks out or he walks out. How much more damage are you going to do to your children as they grow up learning that their home is not a safe place and that their parent isn’t there to love them and protect them but to be appeased and pleased at all costs.

How much pain are you going to accumulate by hanging onto your character flaws, your sins before you answer the call of Jesus to repent – and let Him change you. And He is ready and willing and able to do it. Jesus said, “**Repent – AND BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS!**”

We heard the Good news in the earlier reading, the Lost and Found chapter of the Bible, Luke 15. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered it, but we ought to shout it from the rafters:

Slide: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!” (Luke 15:2 CSB)

And He doesn't wait for us to come to Him. The Good Shepherd searches for the lost sheep, the woman searches for the coin. The Father runs out to meet his son. And oh, how he celebrates - when we answer these Red Letters. Jesus said:

Slide: “I tell you, in the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:10 CSB)

It's like God throws a party in heaven for you – when you change your mind and your heart and come to Him. And that party is not pretend, because the Lord Jesus truly paid for the forgiveness of every human being who ever lived or ever will live. By His sacrifice on the cross, He took responsibility for every wrong thing you have ever done, said or thought. By the victory of His resurrection, He opened wide the door to heaven and into the presence of the angels of God and their joy. Folks, God is in the business of transformation. He wants to help you become what you were intended to be. He has an incredible plan for your life – a destiny that only he can bring about. But he's not going to force it. He has chosen in his grace not to force Himself on you. But when you're ready, He's there to accept your repentance and He's there to forgive. He's there to restore and redeem your brokenness. He's there to celebrate with you – a new and abundant life.

I hope you stick with me all the way throughout this long series. I hope you'll send the links to your family and friends. I hope that you'll consider forming a small group with the Bible study or using it for family devotions. In the **Red Letters** we encounter the Jesus of the Bible, not my Jesus or your Jesus - the Jesus who really came into this world for you. Let's go to Him now in prayer:

Lord Jesus, I thank You for the incredible Grace you offer when You stoop to help me even though I've constantly run from you, gone my own way and done my own thing. Lord, humbly, shakily, I'm returning. But I don't have the strength to make that turn on my own. I pray for the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to make that happen. Remove from me every character defect that stands in the way of my usefulness to You. Forgive me, and help me to rejoice with the angels in heaven as You truly become the Lord of my life. Amen.