

**The Red Letter Challenge: Introduction | Matthew 12:22-32**  
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On July 21st, 1861 a group of people rode their horse and buggies from Washington DC to Manassas, Virginia for a lovely Sunday afternoon picnic. It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? Taking a ride in the country, throwing down a blanket underneath a grove of towering trees, enjoying a delicious spread of your favorite picnic food? It's no surprise that one would want to enjoy such a nice July afternoon.

What is surprising, however, was that their picnic was right in the middle of a battlefield!

This group of people had come from Washington to Virginia to watch a battle...to watch Union soldiers make, what they had anticipated to be, quick work of the Confederacy. But what they actually witnessed was the First Battle of Bull Run, the first major land battle of the Civil War. So as the guns and cannons fired nearby this group of visitors from DC quickly came to the realization that a picnic in the middle of a battlefield wasn't such a great idea after all.

Certainly, though, this was the last time that people had a picnic in the middle of a battlefield, right? You would think so, but that doesn't seem to be the case. Because too often you and I get to thinking that the Christian life is a picnic. We show up on a Sunday morning, drink a little coffee, pick some pastries off of the spread out on the patio, shake some hands, and sing a few songs, chit-chat with our friends. It *seems* like the Christian life is one big picnic. Except that it takes place right in the middle of a great big battle field.

If you don't believe me, this morning let's consider together the parable of the strong man.

Our Gospel text which we read earlier begins with the Pharisees attacking Jesus. Why are they attacking Jesus? Because Jesus had just cast out a demon from a man whose demon possession had caused him to be both blind and mute. As the man was once again able to see and speak the Pharisees start piling on Jesus.

*"It's only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons!"*

The battle is on and **Evil will have its way.**

You see, the Bible calls Satan a liar and a murderer, and a destroyer. In our epistle text it calls him a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Satan isn't a comic book character with horns and a tail and a pitchfork. In John 10, Jesus says he is a thief who comes to, "kill, steal, and destroy".

And it seems like it's working, doesn't it? Evil is working in the lives of the Pharisees as they dismiss the words and the works of Jesus. Rather than seeing Jesus for who he is, the Pharisees see him as Beelzube...the prince of demons. The devil has quite

successfully divided God's people from God's life-giving revelation in Jesus Christ. That's what the devil does. In fact, that's what his name means. Satan means "the accuser" but devil, which in Greek is *diabolos*, comes from the verb *diaballein* which means "to split". The devil is a splitter, a divider, a wedge-driver.

And we've seen it time and time again. We're in the middle of a battle - a spiritual battle - and **evil will have its way**. And that evil just loves to destroy relationships. We see it here with the Pharisees. We see it in Genesis as the devil divides Adam from Eve and both of them from God. The devil divides Jacob from Esau. The devil divides Judas from Jesus.

What about you? What about your life? Your battle? The devil has driven a wedge in some of your relationships hasn't he? With parents or siblings. With those who were once your friends. With fellow church members? The devil has used lies, deceit, he's used sins like pride and greed and gossip and slander. The devil has caused you to hang on to years of anger and resentment. The devil has driven a wedge between you and others...between you and God.

But here's the thing. We don't want to believe any of that. Any talk of the devil or satan or demons, we want to file it away under antiquated religion and move on. In fact, the Barna Group did a study recently and found that 40% of Christians don't believe Satan is real. 40%! The rest of us just pretend like Satan isn't real. We're just out for our picnic.

But in reality we're in the middle of a battlefield. And **evil is having its way**. No doubt about it. You see it, you feel it, you experience it each and every day. Satan lying, stealing, killing his way into making your life miserable...putting a wedge between humanity and God and dragging people with him to hell. We're in the middle of a battlefield and **Evil is having its way**.

But. One pastor, Dr. Reed Lessing, he says that the Gospel always has a big adversative. An adversative is a word that expresses opposition or antithesis. 'But' is that word.

**Evil will have its way BUT Jesus has won the day**. And that's exactly what Jesus tells us in the parable of the strong man. It's a short parable, one verse, verse 29 of our text, but it shows us the victory of Jesus in no uncertain terms.

*"Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house."*

The Pharisees think that Jesus' power over demons comes from the fact that Jesus is the prince of demons. But in truth, it's just the opposite. Jesus isn't the prince of demons, He is God in the flesh. And he's come to destroy the kingdom of Satan. Jesus has entered the strongman's house, bound the strong man, and is now plundering his

house! Jesus has power over demons not because he's in league with Satan but because Jesus has come to absolutely destroy the work of the devil.

Again, in John 10 Jesus says satan, the thief, comes only to steal, kill, and destroy but Jesus has come to bring life, and life abundantly! And that abundant life comes as **Jesus has won the day**. Jesus has won the day and he's plundering the house of Satan. How does he do that?

Well, back in Matthew 4, as Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, Jesus shows Satan what he's all about. Satan tries to use lies and deceit, to misuse Scripture to throw Jesus off track. But Jesus isn't about that. He's about remaining faithful to His Father...Jesus is about trusting in God alone.

How else has Jesus plundered the house of Satan? All over the Gospels Jesus casts out demons and heals the sick. The demonic has no chance against him. Indeed, there is no attack of Satan that Jesus doesn't overcome. It's interesting though, that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus drives out demons a variety of different times. Again and again Jesus encounters a demon and casts it out in the synoptic gospels (Mt, Mk, Lk). But in John's Gospel there is one, universal, exorcism.

In John 12:31-32 Jesus says "Now is the judgement of this world; now will the ruler of this world [the devil] be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself". Jesus plunders the strong man's house again and again, but it's on the cross - when Jesus is lifted up - will Jesus really bind, capture, and render powerless the devil.

**Jesus has won the day**. Romans 6:9 says that death no longer has dominion over Jesus. Jesus has plundered Satan's house, he has overcome sin and death once and for all. Jesus has bound and cast out the demonic forever. That is a universal reality. The death and resurrection of Jesus has made it so. Jesus has won the day.

Yet, there is so much of the devil's work that still needs to be bound in our own lives, isn't there? It's a universal reality that the strongman, Satan, has been bound, but personally, in the midst of our own lives, on our own battlefields, he's still at work. When Jesus comes back to raise us up along with all the dead, at that time Satan will be destroyed forever. But for now, there are parts of our lives, works of the devil in our lives, that need to be bound.

Maybe it's pride, greed, or lust. Maybe it's arrogance. Maybe it's alcohol or drugs. Maybe it's internet porn. Maybe it's anxiety or worry. What is it that's dividing you from your relationships with others? What is it that's driving a wedge between you from God? These are the things that need to be bound in our lives.

And that's why we're taking up The Red Letter Challenge this Lent. Because it's the Red Letters, those words of Jesus which in many Bibles appear in red, it's these words that enable us to bind the works of the devil in our lives and to live life *abundantly* as

Jesus has promised us. It's the words of Jesus that bring life, that bring hope. It's the words of Jesus that destroy the work the devil is doing in our lives.

So we will take up the Red Letter Challenge. And the Red Letter Challenge is all about hearing the words of Jesus and then putting them into practice. If you have to give a one sentence explanation about what the RLC is, it's that: "Listening to the words of Jesus and putting them into practice". And as we go through the RLC, we're going to be exploring five different themes which Jesus teaches about in Scripture and each theme, we'll see, absolutely plunders the work of the devil and allows the words of Jesus to bring us life.

Starting on Tuesday, as we move through the RLC, we'll be exploring five different themes: **Being, Forgiving, Serving, Giving, and Going**. Jesus comes back to these themes again and again and they are absolutely antithetical to the work that Satan tries to do in our lives.

The devil wants to separate us from Jesus - to drive that wedge between us and our Lord. But Jesus calls us to **be** with him. The most important thing about our Christian life and faith isn't our doing. It's our being. We're going to talk a lot about doing stuff in the RLC - serving others, being generous, sharing our faith. **But make no mistake: we are first and foremost a people that spends time with our Lord.** Jesus says, "come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." Jesus calls us to simply **be** with him and take in his life giving words. Jesus calls us to sit with him and listen. Being.

Forgiving.

When we're with Jesus we hear those life giving words of grace, the forgiveness of our sins. Of course the *diabolos* doesn't want us to hear these words. If he's going to drive a wedge between us and God, he's going to whisper lies in our ears. That we're not good enough. That we have done enough. That our sins are too great. That Jesus will never forgive us for this sin or that sin. But those are lies. And as we spend time in the RLC and hear Jesus' words, we'll come to see that his forgiveness is for *us*. No matter what. And because of that, the forgiveness of Jesus enables us to forgive others. To put aside our ego, to let go of the past and simply forgive.

Being. Forgiving. Serving.

As we listen to Jesus, as we receive his forgiveness, we also emulate Jesus. Jesus came not to be served but to serve. More than that, Paul says in Ephesians that you and I were created for good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. So as we listen to Jesus, we hear Jesus' call us to bind our selfishness, our self-centeredness, to bind our pride and begin to live our lives for others as we serve both as a congregation and individually wherever we live and work - even serving across borders in places like Guatemala!

Being. Forgiving. Serving. Giving.

Are we going to talk about money? Absolutely we are. We're on a battlefield, and the devil *loves* to use our finances to keep us at odds with God. That's why Jesus talks so darn much about money and says things like, "where your treasure is there your heart will be also". But as we spend time with Jesus we'll see that we can trust him...even with our finances! We can trust him and be generous with the gifts that God has given to us.

Being. Forgiving. Serving. Giving. Going.

We start with Being and end the RLC with Going. But don't forget...just as the Christian life is about Being with Jesus, it's also about Going with Jesus. Jesus doesn't send us out ill equipped and alone to try and make a difference in this world. What does he say in the great commission? Go and make disciples of all nations...and truly I will be at the bar? Truly I will be with you always until the very end of the age. Jesus sends us out into the world but Jesus continues to do the heavy lifting in outreach and evangelism and building his church. But He does call us to do something: to go and make disciples...to connect more and more people to Him and His love. To build relationships...to connect with people. To be generous with our forgiveness and grace.

Being. Forgiving. Serving. Giving. Going.

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Make no mistake. We are on a battlefield and **Evil will have its way**. Satan is actively working to divide us from one another...to drive a wedge between us and God.

But.

**Evil will have its way BUT Jesus has won the day**. By his death and resurrection Jesus has overcome sin, death, and the devil. He has won for us abundant life now and forever. Evil, though, is still active in our lives. Satan, while universally bound, still needs to be bound in our own lives. And that's what the RLC is all about. It's about drawing nearer and nearer to Jesus and his Word. It's about living our lives as disciples of Jesus, giving thanks to God who has given us victory through Jesus Christ our Lord. It's God's gift to you today! Amen.