



RED LETTER CHRISTIANITY

John 15:14-17

14 You are my friends if you do what I command.

15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

17 This is my command: Love each other.

Special Music: "Red Letter Blueprint"

Scotty McCreery

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYm_B0-EVY

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LETTER OF THE LAW

The tall, portly man removed his cowboy hat, and pushed his way through the door into the sheriff's office so hard and it banged against the stopper with enough force that it still left a small dent in the wall. "Where's the Sheriff? I want to speak to him right now!" the man shouted.

"Woah there, Threads," said Dusty, one of the sheriff's deputies. Tony Harris was the owner of Harris Hardware at the end of Main Street, but everyone in town called him 'Threads'. Tony thought it was a term of endearment, a reflection of how well he dressed, but the truth was that everyone often snickered behind his back because he had absolutely no taste when it came to clothes and was always overdressed in a very loud sort of way. "The sheriff isn't here right now. How can I help you?" continued Dusty.

"I want to have someone arrested, Dusty, and it needs to do it before she gets away with it!"

"She who, Threads? Catch your breath and tell me what's going on."

"She is breaking the law, Dusty. I won't have it. You need to do something!"

"Who's breaking the law, Threads?" The man was waving his fists in the air and stomping his feet. His face was as crimson as the red beets down at the Farmer's Market. Dusty was afraid that Threads' blood pressure was totally out of control. He gently pushed him toward a chair, avoiding the swinging arms.

“It’s that Portales girl. You know the one. Anne, Anne something, Annabel! That’s it. Annabel. The one that always dresses in coveralls. Looks to be about fourteen with ratty hair. Always covered in dirt. Mangy looking. I’m sure you’ve seen her, Dusty. She’s no better than her dad. There’s a reason they call Frank ‘Fleabite.’ He’s a good for nothing gardener that thinks himself a landscaper. He’s no more a landscaper than I’m a tap dancer. And his daughter is just like him. She needs to be stopped!”

“Calm down, Threads. Sit in the chair and calmly tell me what’s going on. How much trouble can a 14-year-old girl get into in Parable?”

“Plenty, Dusty. Plenty of trouble.”

“Spit is out, Threads.”

“Well, Dusty, I was out taking my morning walk down by the spillway. You know I go walking down there every morning before work. Helps clear my mind for the day. Anyway, I was just walking along, minding my own business, and there she was, sitting on the spillway. Felonious child.”

“What was she doing that has you so upset, Threads?”

“Well, she was... can you believe it? Fishing! Right there beside the “No Fishing” sign. Bigger than daylight. Just ignoring the law. Fishing! She had a fishing pole and a bucket and what looked like one of those round paper containers from Randy Mendelson’s feed store. You know the ones. The ones he uses to sell worms.”

“And...?” asked Dusty.

“What do you mean, and...? She was breaking the law. No one is supposed to be fishing off the spillway. You know that!”

“Did she catch anything?” Dusty asked calmly.

“Now, how do I know that, Deputy? I didn’t stick around to see what was in her bucket. I came straight here to tell you about it. I expect you to go down there and arrest her! Let her know she can’t do that.”

“Now, now, Threads. What’s the real problem here? It’s not like you to get upset because some young girl is fishing off the spillway. You know that people do that all the time. I have even seen you doing it occasionally and I didn’t arrest you. Yes, there’s a sign. But it’s there to protect people from getting hurt if there’s a flash flood. We put up the sign 10 years ago after the Jenkins boy caught up in the overflow. We didn’t want that to ever happen again, even though we were able to save the boy. There’s not a cloud in the sky today. There is no danger of a flood. What are you really angry about?”

“She doesn’t belong here, Deputy. She’s dirty, messy, and unkempt, looks like she hasn’t had a bath in weeks, and it is obvious that she’s not eating well. Skinny as a rail. She probably smells to high heaven, but I didn’t get close enough to get a whiff. It is so obvious that her no-good dad isn’t taking proper care of her. And now he’s letting her run around breaking the law. I won’t have it, I tell you. Now, get out there and do your duty.”

“Threads, you really have no clue what’s going on here, do you? Gee, I thought everyone in town knew about this. I guess I was wrong. I want you to listen to me for a minute, Tony. After Frank’s wife died during COVID, he was left to raise the girl by himself. Frank’s wife was working over at the clinic, which is where she caught COVID. We didn’t have the facilities to help her here, so the ambulance took her over to the hospital in Rusksville. But she didn’t make it. The hospital had run out of beds and respirators. They did everything they could, but it wasn’t enough. And right after that, Parable, like so many other towns, went into an economic slump because of COVID. All of those shelter-in-place rules caused the town to start laying people off. And one of those layoffs was Frank. Now, he did his best to make ends meet, just like everyone else. He was doing every odd job he could find just to keep a roof over Annabel’s head. He didn’t even have the money to bury his wife, so she was cremated and scattered in the Potters Field south of town, just like so many others had to be. When the town finally hired him back, well he was so far behind on everything he lost the house.

Things were slow over at the Bent Tree Motel and Jackson Sellers let Frank and Annabel stay in one of the rooms. Frank did all the hotel maintenance in lieu of payment. But there were still a lot of bills and Frank was having a difficult time keeping food on the table. Still is. So, Annabel goes down to the spillway every morning to see what she can catch for supper. Those catfish and occasional bass or perch go a long way to help keep them fed. And yes, Tony, I look the other way. So does Sheriff Tom and Deputy Wagner. Judge Darling thinks it’s the right thing to do as well.

And you come busting in here like an angry dog and want me to run out there and arrest her. What's up with that, Tony? Don't you have anything better to do than harass a young girl trying her best to help her dad?"

Suddenly, the office was very quiet. Everyone had stopped to listen to what Dusty was saying. "Deputy... I... I didn't know," said Tony. "I must sound like a crazy person."

"That just about sums it up, Tony. I'm surprised that you are so callous. So no, I'm not going to arrest her. As a matter of fact, Frank keeps a running tab over at Big Sam's Market. And Sam has let that account continue to grow without complaining. After we are finished here, I think I will run by Sam's place and take care of that bill myself. Somehow, today, I just feel like it's the right thing to do," said Dusty.

"Oh... no, Deputy," stammered Threads. "You will do no such thing. Let me take care of it. I can't believe I acted like this, Dusty. I should have been paying closer attention to what's been going on around town. Can we just forget that I even came in today? I will take care of this. Not to worry."

"Well, if you insist, Threads. Thanks for stopping by and I won't mention this to anyone, and neither will anyone else in the office, will they?" Dusty looked around the room as the others turned quickly away and went back to their work.

Threads left the office quietly. He had a lot to think about.

A couple of days later, Dusty dropped by the access road to the spillway to see if Annabel was still fishing every morning. He didn't want her to see him

there, so he kept himself hidden in the bushes. When he reached the bank by the spillway he was surprised to see two figures there, both fishing. Both laughing. Annabel must have heard Dusty and she looked up. She winked at him and giggled again. But Threads must not have heard him because he never looked up. He just went about baiting his hook for another cast.

Christopher Dunn has served 33 years in prison, narrowly avoiding execution, for a murder he never committed. The two youths who provided eyewitness testimony at his trial have since become adults and have admitted that they lied on the stand. The entire case was based on their testimony. And the Circuit Judge threw out the conviction. But that isn't the ultimate travesty here. Christopher Dunn is still in prison because the Missouri Attorney General refuses to honor the judge's demand for his release. This is the second time in a month that Missouri AG has done this when a prisoner has been found to be falsely accused, and it has caused a great deal of pain for everyone involved.

Somewhere in time, Americans seem to have lost the understanding that the spirit of the law is most often greater than the rule of law. We're afraid to admit when we make a mistake, because we picture all the ramifications that might occur if we give an inch to do the right thing over the wrong thing. It's not about politics, even when people try to make it about politics. Are we so bound by rules that when we discover that we might have broken them, we can't face the consequences without dragging politics into it? Why is it so hard to do the right thing?

Jesus had to remind the Pharisees and Sadducees that the law was made for man, not man for the law. The law was never meant to hinder people. It was meant to be a guidepost, a compass to keep us aligned with how God interprets his own law, not how we interpret it. There is no grace when there is no flexibility, no give for when the spirit of the law contradicts the rule of law, and a conscious

moral decision needs to be made regarding the reason that the law was made in the first place and how and to whom it is applied.

It shouldn't surprise anyone, that even though African Americans make up on 13% of the population in the US, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report, African Americans are 51.2% more likely to be arrested for murder. 52.7% for robbery. And 26.1% more likely to be arrested for crimes involving drugs. 37% of our prison population is African American. And we wonder why our black brothers and sisters seem so sad and angry as they are always looking over their shoulders.

It's too easy for us to get upset with the man who runs a stop sign when we can't see that his wife sitting next to him in the car is in labor, and they are headed for the hospital. Or when someone gets physical with someone else who is attempting to rob a convenience store, and we find ourselves getting angry because we can't see the gun. Or when someone runs into a store to grab a bottle of water without paying for it when there is a person outside struggling with heat exhaustion or dehydration. Or even fishing in a place with a 'No Fishing' sign when we can't see that the person may not have eaten in several days. It is so easy for us to jump to the wrong conclusion when we don't have all the facts. We often question where the outrage is when someone is hurt or killed because of someone else's negligence, especially when it involves an officer of the law. Please don't misunderstand me when I say that. I believe that the vast majority of law enforcement officers believe in what they are doing and are genuinely focused on how to protect and to serve their communities. I have a

profound respect and admiration for them and their families as they go to work every day and step into the dangers of which most of us are completely unaware. It requires a tremendous amount of dedication and sacrifice, and they seldom get the recognition they so deserve. But the key to being a great law officer is the ingrained desire to be fair and flexible when involved in questionable circumstances.

3 Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?”

4 But they remained silent. So, taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way.

5 Then he asked them, “If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?”

6 And they had nothing to say. Luke 14:3-6

Jesus implores us to use common sense when we are talking about the law. But he did not call for us to throw out the law. The laws that God established for all humans were not meant to constrict us, but to free us from the constraints placed upon us by earthly boundaries. When man’s laws and God’s laws contradict each other, and we have all found ourselves in those kinds of situations, God expects his law to prevail among his children, even if the cost to our own person is severe.

I cannot say this too often. Jesus even simplified the equation for us when...

37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’

38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Matthew 22:37-40

If we embed these words in our hearts and actions, we will find ourselves obeying all of God’s law and most of human laws. If we return to our example of the man running the stop sign on the way to the hospital because his wife is in labor and add to it an officer who sees the offence, we see a clear example of what Jesus is talking about. Do you think that officer stops the vehicle and takes the time to write the man a ticket? Or does the officer quickly determine the right course of action and escort the man and his wife to the hospital to ensure everyone’s safety? That officer may even need to deliver that baby themselves. When we allow the letter of the law to override our compassion and understanding, we fail both God and his children.

That doesn’t mean that we chuck the law out the window in the name of flexibility. The officer has every right and expectation of giving us a ticket if our excuse is that we are ‘Late for a meeting’ or if he determines that we are acting in

a self-righteous manner by saying something stupid like, “Do you know who I am, officer? I am a very important person.”

Jesus himself says, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Matthew 5:17**

Jesus is a respecter of the Law. His intent is to clarify its purpose and show us how it frees us rather than confines us.

Red Letter Christianity. What does that mean? **“You seem to be straying from the point of this message pastor. We’ve heard all this before. What are you trying to say?”**

I would like to ask you all a question. What happens when the situations we face run in direct conflict of the Law, either God’s law or human law or perhaps both? How do we make the determination of when it is alright to save the donkey in the ditch? Are we breaking the law if we help someone on the Sabbath? Isn’t that work? Doesn’t God expressly forbid us to do that? What about cutting our elderly neighbor’s lawn or working on a vehicle for a widow on a Sunday afternoon.

When Jesus says

“27 The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

He means just that. That the law is meant as a helper, a guidepost for us, not a sword to harm or neglect each other.

So, it is with the Bible. We can use the Bible to lift and help each other, or we can use the bible like a sword to pound each other over the head with it. What do you think Jesus would tell us if he we standing in our midst? And he is. Standing in our midst. Right here. Right now. What do you think he has to say about all this? What in the world in Red Letter Christianity?

When we find ourselves conflicted by our choices, where one part of the Bible says one thing and another part says something else; when what human law is demanding of us and it seems somehow wrong, self-serving, dispassionate, or lacking grace; then what do we do? It's really quite simple to draw a line when everything is black and white. But most of our lives are lived in gray areas, where we are expected to justify our choices when we run contrary to the law or even the perception of the law.

Is it okay for Christians to dance?

Is it wrong to have a piano in church?

Do I stop and save the stray dog?

Do I give money to the guy with a sign by the road?

Do I stop and smell the roses even if there is a 'no loitering' sign?

Do I tip even when a tip isn't expected?

How do we react when a car fails to yield, even when we know we have the right-of-way?

What about that lady who doesn't obey the merge signs at road construction sites and rushes up to the cones expecting to be let in?

All these incidents can be considered wrong, unlawful, or even just uncourteous and we have to make a choice on how to deal with them. Do we really understand that God expects us to put every one else's needs before our own?

That is where Red Letter Christianity becomes our prioritized guide. What do the words of Jesus, the red letters in many Bibles, tell us? Matthew 5:38-48 are the words of Jesus to help us with the questionable decisions that we are forced to make. These words are not options, even when they are contrary to the laws of the people. These words of Jesus tell us exactly what is expected of us, even though we do not want to hear it.

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.

41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

43 You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

- 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,**
- 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**
- 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?**
- 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?**
- 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”**

This is the scale that every decision we make is weighed on, even as we attempt to justify contrary actions. This is why the teachings of Jesus are considered so radical. They run contrary to human nature. And it is why the Jewish leaders hated him enough to kill him. The words of Jesus are the foundation of our belief system, and they are life changing. But they can't change our lives if we choose to ignore them when we feel conflicted.

“But preacher, people will think I'm a doormat and take advantage of me!”

My reply to that is simple and not one that anyone I know cares to hear. I will simply ask you how many people do think Jesus took care of without them ever thanking him or following him? Do we believe that Jesus was a doormat for ungrateful people? If we do, then why do we follow him? Seems like inhuman behavior, a contradiction to human nature.

Jesus expects us to rise above our humanness. The question that remains is, “Are we up to following this path?” Or do we believe that we can toss these words aside when we feel justified to go another direction? Just remember, when we choose to go in that other direction and ignore these words, we are choosing human law over God’s law.

That is this week’s question. Dare we contemplate how embracing Red Letter Christianity will guide us in our decision making process? Are we ready to embrace the freedom found in the words of Christ, or do we remain bound to the legal structure that human law provides? When faced with difficult choices are we willing to step into what is right in God’s eyes or do we allow ourselves to get bogged down by society norms that seek only to constrain us? In whose words is the Law made perfect?

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God bless you all!

AMEN

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