

## **Building A Church Without Limits**

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Building A Church For Others

Matthew 25:14-30

As a pastor, one thing I've discovered about every person I've ever talked with is that every person has had to confront some kind of challenge. Every person has had to surmount some kind of difficulty. Every person bumps into some kind of barrier. What I love are stories about people who have not only faced obstacles or bumped into barriers, but who faced obstacles and barriers that would defeat most of us and who overcame those things. I love stories of overcomers, don't you?

How many of you are familiar with the name Sam Sullivan? At the age of 19, Sam broke his neck when he tried to ski through his friend's legs. But instead of going through his friend's legs, Sam crashed into his friend and he heard his own neck snap. He said, "The moment it happened, I knew I would be paralyzed for life."

Sam Sullivan is considered to be a quadriplegic even though he can use his hands and as such can write, use the telephone and drive. For many years, Sam lived on welfare and in government housing. He spent a lot of time contemplating suicide and he thought of various ways he could kill himself: Should I drive my van into a wall? Should I drown myself in the bathtub? Should I just turn on the gas in the oven?

But one day, at age 26, Sam said: "I decided to kill the old Sam Sullivan. I had all these expectations of an able-bodied young guy. I decided that I wouldn't let all of his assumptions hold me back." He said that at the moment in which he decided to kill off the old Sam Sullivan and all of his dreams of what it would be like to live as an able-bodied man, his decision that he wouldn't let those old assumptions hold him back, that moment liberated him. He said: "At that moment everything in my life was a bonus. Before that it was all tragedy."

Sam decided to go back to school. He got his business degree and co-founded the Disabled Sailing Association. He helped create the Martin 16 Sailboat, which gives people with disabilities the opportunity to sail unassisted. Sam co-invented the TrailRider, a one-wheeled vehicle that enables disabled people to travel and participate in hiking and camping trips. Sam also ran for city council in Vancouver, Canada, where he grew up. After serving on Vancouver's city council for 12 years, a few years ago Sam was elected Mayor of Vancouver, Canada, the third largest city in that country.

Sam Sullivan came to the world's attention in one moment at the last Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy. You see, it is traditional during the closing ceremonies for the Olympic flag to be passed from the Mayor of the host city to the Mayor of the next host city. And typically, the Mayor of the next host city waves the flag on the stage. Well, Vancouver is hosting the next Winter Olympics. And how could Sam Sullivan, a quadriplegic wave the flag?

It was suggested to him that he just ride up on the stage in his wheelchair and have someone else wave the flag for him. But, see, Sam Sullivan is the kind of guy who doesn't let obstacles get in his way. He got a bracket for his wheelchair; and then, for several weeks at night, he went to a deserted parking lot and practiced spinning his wheelchair in such a way that it would wave the flag. He said that he hoped the police wouldn't show up because they would think he was crazy.

And so in 2006 when the flag was passed to Sam Sullivan on the world's biggest stage, millions of people around the world saw Sam pirouette in his wheelchair. He said, "I put a lot of work into it making sure it looked elegant and had some drama to it." The Vancouver City Hall was inundated with tens of thousands of messages by well-wishers from around the world.

SLIDE – Picture of Sam Sullivan waving the Olympic Flag

Learning how to wave a flag, or getting elected Mayor, doesn't exhaust Sam's breaking of barriers. He says he also dabbles in learning foreign languages. Because Vancouver has a large Chinese population, Sam decided to learn Cantonese. He gave part of his mayoral acceptance speech in Cantonese. When he was in Turin, he spoke to the reporters in Italian.

Whenever someone says to you: There is no way you could ever do this with your limitations, or whenever someone says: You don't know what I'm facing, I can't succeed in this area, think of Sam Sullivan.

I'm starting a new series that I'm calling "Building a Church for Others" – the kind of church Vineyard Columbus aspires to be. And I was thinking about Sam Sullivan and all the other barrier breakers in the world who don't let obstacles or challenges define who they are. I thought to myself, "Wouldn't it be great to have a church filled with people who have Sam's attitude towards life." In this first talk in my series of messages titled "Building a Church for Others," I've called today's talk, "Building a Church Without Limits." Let's pray.

SLIDE – Mt 25:14-30

14 "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. 15 To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. 16 The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his

money to work and gained five bags more. 17 So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. 18 But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. 20 The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.' 21 "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' 22 "The man with two bags of gold also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.' 23 "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' 24 "Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25 So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' 26 "His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? 27 Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. 28 " 'Take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. 29 For those who have will be given more, and they will have an abundance. As for those who do not have, even what they have will be taken from them. 30 And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Now by my title, "Building a Church Without Limits," I certainly don't mean that we want to have a church, or we want to produce people, who live life without moral limits.

#### SLIDE

##### No moral limits

Some people try to live life as if you can live without moral limits – you know, living like a rock star, or wealthy heiress, partying every night. You see what happens to people who try to live as if there are no moral limits. Folks end up addicted, checking themselves in and out of rehab. People end up with sexually transmitted diseases. Trying to live as if there are no moral limits is like trying to live as if there is no gravity. God's moral laws are just as real as his physical laws. You can't violate either without ultimately wrecking your life.

Some of you know this one. I love the Message version of the Bible's translation of Rom. 2.7,

#### SLIDE – Rom. 2.7

If you go against the grain, you get splinters, regardless of which neighborhood you're from, what your parents taught you, or what schools you attended. But if you embrace the way God does things, there are wonderful pay-offs, again without regard to where you are from or how you were brought up.

You can't cut across the moral grain of this universe without getting splinters. When I talk about life without limits, or a church without limits, I am not talking about moral limits. I am talking about living without self-imposed limits.

#### SLIDE

##### No moral limits vs. no self-imposed limits

See, as creatures made by God, we human beings all have to live within some size box that God has designed for us to live in – a box of gifts and our abilities, our opportunities. We don't get to pick the size of the box we're in. In the parable we read, it is the Master who determined how to allocate talents – whether five talents, or two talents, or one talent. Some of us are in really big boxes; others of us are in smaller boxes.

We as human beings, as creatures designed by God, don't have infinite possibilities for our lives, or infinite potential. Only God has that. I'm 5'8" on a good day. And at age 51 I have about a 12" vertical leap. I've had to come to grips with the fact that I will never play pro-basketball, nor will ever play centerfield for the NY Yankees. I've been put in a certain size box by God, and so have you. Our job in life is not to grieve that we weren't put in other sized boxes, or to envy the circumstances and opportunities that someone else has been given. Our job in life is to fully explore and to fill out the box we are put in and to not live with self-imposed limits. There is a lot more in the box you've been put in that you've never fully explored. There is a lot more for virtually all of us in terms of reaching the full potential God has given.

And to put this in a church context, I don't believe a church gets to determine whether it is going to be a five talent church, a two talent church, or a one talent church. We can't project our dreams up to the sky and insist that God fulfill our dreams. But whatever size box the Lord has made for Vineyard Columbus, our job is to fill it out to the full, to not live with the limits of what other people say is the proper way to do church, or the limits of our own fears of failure, the limits of the grooved out path of conventional expectations, or professional church critics.

So what if evangelical churches generally take a culture wars approach to the larger society. Why can't we carve out a different identity and be the best friend our city ever had? Why not aim not only at building a great church, but at living in a great city and a great state? So, what if the church world says either you are theologically orthodox and care about personal morality or you are theologically liberal and care about social justice. Why can't we create another alternative?

Let's be fully biblical and care about both personal morality and social justice. Let's throw off the limits of what's conventional and expected.

We can't choose, friends, the number of talents we've been given. What we do choose is what we are going to do with our talents and how much of the box, or to use a different metaphor, how much we are going to improve upon and develop what we're going to do with what we've been given.

Now, I need to explain to you the meaning of this word "talent" that is used in this parable. In its original context, a talent was, in Jesus' day, first of all a measure of weight somewhere between 60-80 pounds. And then it became a unit of coinage. Now, it is very difficult to transfer the value of money from one culture to another, and one period of history to another. About the best you could say is what we are talking about by a talent is the sum of money that an average worker in Jesus' day would have earned in 20 years of labor. So, if you figure that the average worker today makes \$40,000/year, then a talent, in terms of earning power today, would be about \$800,000. When the New International Version says in a note on the bottom of the page, "a talent was worth more than \$1000," that is an incredible understatement. A talent is significantly more than \$1000. It is about \$800,000.

The Master here is obviously quite wealthy and is incredibly generous. He handed out about \$6 million. The parable is telling us about the character of our Lord. He is amazingly generous to us.

Our English word, which refers to special abilities, special gifts – things like musical gifts, artistic talents, and speaking abilities – is actually taken from this parable. We got the word "talent" from this story of the talents. People always ask, "What did Jesus specifically mean when he said that the Master entrusted talents to his servants? Is he just talking about money? Is he referring to our gifts and abilities? Is he referring to spiritual gifts? What, exactly, do the talents symbolize?

I believe that Jesus is being deliberately vague because he is referring to the whole of our lives that have been given so generously to us by God. I believe that your talents, at least in reference to this text, can refer to your opportunities for service, your talents could include your time, you could apply this parable to your money; you could apply it to your gifts and abilities; you could apply it to your intellect; to your capacity for empathy; to your gentle nature; to your strength; to your health. A talent is anything that you have been given that you could multiply for the glory of God. Anything. Your artistic ability, your ability to repair cars, your free time – all that makes up you and the box you are in – that is your talent.

But your talents also include the negative experiences of your life. What God has saved you out of – promiscuity, drug use, a divorce, depression, eating

disorders, unemployment – whatever God has done in your life to deliver you, to redeem you, to teach you and grow you, and to mold you through negative experiences, that is what he wants you to invest in other people's lives. Those learning, growing, and saving experiences are some of the greatest talents you have.

The reason I underline the negative stuff you have been saved out of as one of your talents is because this is so often neglected. God wants a return on everything, literally everything he has done in your life and my life. Someone else can benefit from the school of hard knocks that we've been too. There are people who can receive comfort from the comfort the Lord gave you in your hour of need. Whatever you have learned from, whatever you have grown from – misunderstanding, unfair treatment, rotten jobs, and sudden lay-offs – if you say to the Lord: Lord, let me learn from this. Let me grow from this. Don't let this pain go wasted in my life. That friend, can become a talent to invest in other people. Have you considered using some of the negative experiences in your life to help someone else? Do you think you could find a way to make a difference in another person's life as a result of your life experience?

Now, on your outlines, I've put some pairs of items that contain opposing concepts. For example, the first one was "No moral limits vs. Living without self-imposed limits." But here is the second contrast:

#### SLIDE

Seeing life as a sacred trust vs. seeing life as an owner

In this story there is a key word that is mentioned in v. 14 and again in vv. 20 and 22. The word is entrusted.

#### SLIDES

Mt 25:14

14 "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them.

Mt 25:20

20 The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.'

Mt 25:22

22 "The man with two bags of gold also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.'

What we are talking about is a whole view of life in which we either see that we are working for ourselves, that we are masters of our own destinies, self-made men and women, independent contractors; or, if instead we see ourselves as working on behalf of another, accountable to someone else, constantly aware

that all that we are and all that we have is a sacred trust. See, I think this is a fundamental line of demarcation between the two good servants on the one hand in this story and the wicked servant on the other. I think it is the difference between seeing life as a sacred trust and seeing life as an owner as the fundamental line of demarcation between the world's view of life and a Christian view of life.

I think it is a fundamental line of demarcation between faithful churches and unfaithful churches. Bad churches, bad pastors and bad people are always owners. Sometimes I hear pastors say: "My people" in reference to members of a church. It always makes me cringe. Or folks will talk about "my ministry." In some churches there is a lot of church politics and church power plays. In some churches the Holy Spirit is not given any liberty to lead the church. And Jesus is replaced as the head of the church. So often what you see in church life is embezzlement. The church is not seen by the people or the leaders as a sacred trust. That we do church under the headship of Christ, by the leadership of the Spirit.

So we take what belongs to God and we act like it belongs to us. And we can do with the church whatever we feel like.

But it is Christ' body. The church is Christ's bride. The church is Christ's people.

We Americans, we are such embezzlers. We embezzle credit from God. Instead of saying, "Thank you, God, that you gave me these abilities that you put into my life, this work ethic that you gave me, the parents you gave to encourage me, or the schooling that I got." We take all the credit for ourselves.

We embezzle every gift God has given us and we make it our own. Think about it. God gives us the gift of sex. It is a sacred trust. God says in his Word over and over again how he wants that gift to be used. He wants sex to be used to express love between a man and a woman in the context of a lifelong committed relationship. And we say: "God, it belongs to me. I have a right to use this gift anyway I feel like. Sex is about meeting my needs. My body is my own." Haven't you heard folks say that regarding the life of the unborn, as if a woman or man owns a baby in the womb instead of the baby in the womb being a sacred trust to be protected, to be cared for, to be nurtured into life. We speak about the right to do with our bodies whatever we please. We are such embezzlers as Americans.

But you know, it is really funny that our ownership in life only concerns the good things. But when it comes to the bad things and bad decisions we made, bad consequences from our bad actions, we Americans no longer own those things.

Let me give you a little illustration. If you were to go down to a local prison and you began to ask prisoners, "How did you end up here?" You might hear statements like this:

Prisoner #1 would say, "I am here because I grew up in a really bad family. Dad was an alcoholic."

Prisoner #2 would say, "I am here because I fell in with a bad crowd. I had bad friends."

Prisoner #3 would say, "I am here because I have this addiction."

The truth is that we have chosen in the United States right now to take no ownership of the bad in our lives, but only the good. Regarding the bad, we are simply victims who have been pushed around, influenced, directed by bad people, by abusive people, by hurtful people, but we do not in any way have the responsibility or bottom-line ownership for our problems.

Do you realize, friends, that the Bible tilts the thing exactly in the other direction? And while the Bible does recognize that there are abusive people and victimizers and people who are hurtful, nevertheless, by and large, when it comes to the bad in life, it calls you to own that. To own your sin. To say I am responsible for my choices and the kind of person I am. On the other hand regarding the good in life, the Bible says that that was given to you as a gift. You have been given a sacred trust. This is a grace.

You say, "That sounds rather unfair, Rich. How is it that I should only own the bad and not the good?"

The reason why we can own the bad, (and this is not in any way an unfair statement) is because we Christians understand that God is willing in the sending of his Son, Jesus, to take over ownership of the bad for us. You see, the meaning of the cross is that Jesus who never did any bad, who didn't commit any sin is willing to come along side of us and say to us, "If you simply acknowledge your sin, if you confess your bad choices and bad responses, you can transfer ownership of the bad in your life to me." But you know until you own your sin, until you stop blaming your friends, your ex-spouse, your parents for your choices, you can never transfer ownership to Jesus? We can't confess the sins of another. We can't confess our Dad's sins, our ex-husband's sin, and our kids' sins. We can forgive another's sin, but we can only confess our own sins. And if you want God to not only be the owner of the good in your life, but of the bad in your life, then you must say, "God, regarding the bad...okay. I do take ownership of that and then I transfer it to you."

I do believe that good churches and good and faithful servants are churches and servants that see regarding all of the opportunities and all of the people and all of



what is called here “talents” are simply God-given trusts to us. We need to pray: God help me to see the opportunities all around me. We must constantly be aware of embezzling; we must constantly give the credit to God. To remind ourselves to say “thank you”. When complimented, we praise God. When we get done with a task, we turn immediately in our heart and we give the glory to God. As stewards, church leaders must constantly try to not take control, but to give control back to the Holy Spirit. When we look at our careers, we are saying, “God, what do you want?” When we look at our future, we are saying, “God, I am loose change in your pockets. Do with us according to your will.”

When we look at ministry, we say, “God, direct.” We look at the church and we say, “It is yours, Oh Lord.” We have been given sacred trusts. We are not owners.

And then there is a third contrast that I want you to note:

SLIDE

Being urgent vs. being a procrastinator

It says in Matthew 25.16,

SLIDE – Mt 25:16

16 The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more.

The good servant went to work at once, right away. See, good servants, good churches have a healthy level of urgency about obeying God. We hear God saying continually regarding the use of our talents, “Use them now. Do it now. Don’t delay. Don’t wait.”

See, I believe that bad servants and bad churches are deceived by Satan who constantly says to you and to me, “It is okay if you wait on obedience. I know that you are hearing the voice of God now, but just wait. Don’t respond right now. Do your duty later.” The good servant in this story took the five talents and at once began to work with them.

Friends, the Spirit of God is always prodding a person to immediate obedience. The Spirit of God is always pushing you to obey right now. It may be a little thing like pick up your Bible in the morning and begin to read, now. Pray now.

But the enemy comes along and says, “You don’t need to read your Bible right now even though you heard the voice of the Spirit. No, don’t read your Bible now, read the newspaper instead and a little later you can read your Bible.”

“You don’t need to pray now, you will always find time later in the day to pray. Put it off.” “Don’t offer to pray for the sick person at your job now. It’s too

uncomfortable. Delay until you feel more comfortable.” You don’t need to join a small group right now. Don’t go tonight. You’re tired. You’re not in the mood. Go another time. Put off commitment.

Don’t forgive right now when you feel that conviction of the Holy Spirit that you need to forgive this person that you are angry with. No. Delay and harbor some bitterness for a while. Fantasize revenge. Tomorrow, tomorrow you will obey.

You know, the Lord spoke to me some years ago very clearly when I was struggling with a particular issue in my life whether I should obey him or not. And the Lord spoke to me, not in any kind of audible voice but in my mind I had a very strong impression of the Lord saying, “Rich, what is it about tomorrow that will make obedience any easier than it is today? What makes tomorrow any different?” The great lie is don’t confront right now a family member who is an alcoholic. It will be much easier to deal with the problem tomorrow.

We always find regarding fundamental problems that fundamental problems do not just go away. They just get worse. Tomorrow will be harder, actually, than today. But the lie is always delay. Delay the difficult thing. Delay the active obedience. Certainly, when you are contemplating giving your life to Jesus Christ, it is the Spirit of God who will be saying to you, “Do it now. Commit now.” But it is the enemy who comes along and says, “Wait. You can always commit tomorrow, the next day, next week.”

The same thing is true about evangelism. The Holy Spirit says share your faith now. Say something now. Speak up now. But this other voice comes in – now is not a good time; wait for a more convenient moment; keep your mouth shut.

Friend, there is a window of opportunity that God gives us. Sometimes we experience special grace for believing God, special grace for giving, special grace for obedience, and for breaking off an addiction. And if we seize the moment, we are propelled forward and the Kingdom of God expands. But if we wait, the grace lifts and the window closes.

Good servants and good churches always have an urgency about them in which now is the time for obedience. Now is the time for commitment. Now is the time for giving. Now is the time to communicate the gospel. And bad servants are always listening to the voice of the enemy that says, “Don’t worry. Delay.” We are lied to. We are often told that now is a particularly hectic time. Now is a particularly difficult time. Now is a particularly stressful time. Generally speaking, I have found that life is always busy. If your life is anything like mine, life is always hectic. Life always has a lot of demands. Life is always stressful. The fact is, I don’t know about you, but my life does not have a pause button on it like a DVD. It is a total deception to believe that you are going to find the pause button this summer or the pause button this fall; the truth is there is no pause button in life. The Lord says to you and to me obey His voice right now.

Now the focus of this parable is clearly on the third and final servant – the wicked servant. Half the story is focused on this person. In fact, the other two servants are really just foils that set up the exchange between the Lord and the wicked servant. We read in vv. 24-25 these words:

SLIDE – Mt 25:24-25

24 “Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25 So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

One of the differences between the wicked servant and the good servants, the wicked servant was an uncommitted observer,

SLIDE

The uncommitted observer

And the good servants were,

SLIDE

The uncommitted observer vs. the committed investors

I say this with all affection, but some of you won’t commit to the Vineyard and you won’t commit to any church, perhaps because you don’t agree with every single thing, or you’ve been hurt by a church in the past. Maybe you’ve had some relational bruises, or you just don’t like commitments. Maybe you are the kind of person who likes to keep your options open. Like this servant, you want to keep yourself safe, and so you observe and critique, but you won’t invest.

Uncommitted observers of church always approach churches with a check list.

- The church does pretty well with A-B-and C, but I don’t see D-E-and F.

Friend, if you approach church life with a checklist, I mean a checklist that goes beyond basic orthodox teaching and a good healthy environment for your kids, but if you approach church with a checklist, you will never make a commitment here or anywhere else. You will always keep church at arm’s length. I’ve seen this over and over again with folks. They come here; they are real excited for six months or a year; and, then you don’t see them much any longer. They are on to another place. And if you look at the person’s spiritual history, this has been the pattern for a decade. They have never made a deep commitment where they have put all their chips on the table and really invested. I don’t mean just show up on Sunday, but really invest in terms of time and serving, giving a full tithe, lots of prayer for the church, and deep relational connections. You know, the person who moves from one church to another with their checklist, is the person

who is protected from ever really having to invest because they can be professional critics.

One of the biggest myths in church life is that big givers want to control the church. I've heard that spoken to me many, many times over the year. Have you had problems with your big givers? Maybe somewhere someone had a problem with a big giver, but my experience in 20 years of pastoring is that the biggest givers, and the greatest servers are always the most encouraging about church life. It seems that the more people invest the happier they are. We have folks in the church who have taught in children's ministry for years and they write me the nicest notes about the church and the opportunities they are seeing. Over the years I've received almost no complaints from big givers and great servers. People who are committed, folks who tear up their checklists and invest, are always the happiest and most supportive.

Do you know who are the most critical of the church – uncommitted observers and big takers. People who take and don't give. If you go back in this church's history, and I'm sure this is true of other churches, but people we've poured ourselves out for, we've given dozens and dozens of counseling hours to, we've given thousands of dollars of support, there is always something that makes that person unhappy. This principle of increased joy through committed investing and loss and anger through uncommitted observing and taking – this is what Jesus is talking about in vv. 28-29.

SLIDE – Mt 25:28-29

28 “Take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. 29 For those who have will be given more, and they will have an abundance. As for those who do not have, even what they have will be taken from them.

We see this principle of loss, upset and anger not only in church, we see it in all of life. Some of you won't invest in your marriages. You and your spouse just go through the motion. You may as well be business partners. But despite the fact that your marriage is not satisfying to you, it is not satisfying to your spouse, you won't invest in counseling. You won't put yourself on the line and make yourself vulnerable and give it all that you have. You won't attend a marriage seminar; you won't try to make changes. You say, “Why should I? I've got a check list for my partner and they aren't fulfilling their check list, so why should I give myself to them?”

Jesus says, “If you won't invest in your marriage, then you lose.” Everyone who is an uncommitted observer of life loses. Some of you don't have a group of great friends. I talked with a colleague in ministry recently. I asked him, “Who do you open up to? Who do you talk to about your marriage, about your struggles, about your lust, about your problems?” He said, “No one. I have tons of acquaintances, but I have no real friends.” He has not invested in building

friendships. Recently, his church hit a curve and there was no place for him to turn. He found himself on his own.

And then I think we see here, if we expand this out beyond the individual to the church, we see the distinction between:

SLIDE

The self-preserving church vs. the risk-taking church

This man said he was afraid in v. 25,

SLIDE – Mt 25:25

25 So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

In the original context in which this parable was being told, the wicked, lazy servant was almost certainly the Chief Priests and the Pharisees who hoarded for themselves God's mercy and refused to share God's mercy with others. They were so concerned about preserving Israel's great heritage of faith that the constructed barriers which kept other people from access to God. Here is what Jesus said in Mt. 23.13,

SLIDE – Mt 23:13

13 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

They criticized Jesus as being a friend of sinners. They were so preoccupied with making sure that the community of faith was kept pure, that they would not risk reaching out to people they thought were beyond the pale of God's mercy.

Does the Vineyard exist just to preserve itself or does the Vineyard exist to give itself away, to risk, to put it all on the line? Is the Vineyard just an exclusive club for people like us, or do we erect a huge sign that says: Welcome! All over town – welcome!

This danger of creeping Pharisaism, building a church for people like us, the already converted, the already committed, and building barriers to others - this danger always exists in religious life. It is always a temptation to make something other than Jesus the main issue. Let me share with you a personal illustration.

I was invited several months ago by a member of this church to preach at the Governor's Prayer Breakfast. As I prayed about this invitation, I pray about invitations, I felt like the Lord was telling me to do it. I accept invitations to speak almost anywhere where they don't restrict what I have to say. So I've preached

at a local Unitarian church a few years ago. I thought: When am I going to get a chance to present the gospel of Jesus Christ to 150 Unitarians? I've spoken at my former Alma Mater, the OSU College of Law. When do I get an opportunity to speak to a room full of law professors and law students. And I work with people on issues that I can agree with folks on, and don't work with people on issues where we disagree.

So, as I prayed about this invitation, I felt like this was a great opportunity. Friends, I can't tell you how disturbing some of the emails have been regarding my acceptance of this invitation. I am going to share with you just one of the emails because I want you to see how far a person can go from the Spirit of Jesus. Someone wrote me and said: "I heard that you are going to speak at a prayer breakfast for the Devil (Gov. Strickland)." Then, they went on to say, "If you are a MAN OF GOD and not just some limp-wristed preacher, who gets a thrill out being around the world's power players, you will rip into this evil monster."

Now, this person made those comments supposedly out of love for the unborn because Gov. Strickland is on the record as being pro-abortion.

Now I'm obviously pro-life and have preached and written and testified at the Ohio House on this issue on many occasions. Where I'm at is unmistakable. But, I thought to myself: You are presenting yourself to me as being a Christian, as being a follower of Jesus. Does it occur to you that the Governor and his administration, and other people in government can be recipients of God's mercy? Does it occur to you that sin is not a respecter of party boundaries? That both Republicans and Democrats are sinners. Does it occur to you that God's grace is not to be hoarded up and reserved just for people who share your perspective on a particular issue, but that God's grace and truth is to be abundantly offered? Does it occur to you that however important a particular issue is, Jesus is the primary thing and that everyone needs Jesus?

Friends, I say this with all affection, but I have found that in general people who are most militant about taking a stance and being uncompromising, often do the least in terms of really changing things. And folks who just go around doing good, who actually serve pregnant moms, and run programs for kids and advocate for health care and food programs, and education end up doing the most in terms of actual change. That's what we are about here at the Vineyard. That's why we are currently working with over 100 women in crisis pregnancies. That's why we have a free medical clinic and job training programs, and an after school program. It's easy to announce a stance. What's tough is to live it out by putting your money and your time where your mouth is.

And you know, it is not just mercy that a church can hoard up. A church can hoard up its own people. Years ago Vineyard Columbus received a prophetic word which has shaped us through our entire history. The prophetic word was:

Give your best away. The reason why our church has been able to plant 24 other churches; and, we have some aggressive plans for continuing this process of church planting; the reason why we can take some of our very best people in the church and send them out to Tanzania for years is because we are not supposed to bury in the ground anything or anyone that God has entrusted to us. We give freely, even as God has freely given us. That's what makes a church great. God pours into us and we give it away – we give it to the community. It is not all about us. It is about building a church for others. And the more we give, the more God pours his life into us.

But whenever we adopt the protectionist mindset, whenever we say, “You know, church exists for me. The purpose of youth group is to make sure that youth leaders keep my kids safe, instead of the purpose of youth group is to train my children to act like Jesus, then we lose it. We lose the spiritual life that God has given us.

Last distinction.

We see in vv. 24-26 the difference between being an excuse maker and being an opportunity seeker.

SLIDE

Being an excuse-maker vs. being an opportunity-seeker

SLIDE – Mt 25:24-26

24 “Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25 So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’ 26 “His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed?

Why did this man bury his talent? He is afraid. Maybe he compared himself with the others and felt inadequate by comparison. He put limits on himself and he put limits on the generosity of God.

You know what is really interesting to me in this? It is the response of the Master to this excuse maker, who buried the gifts God had given him in the ground. Here is what we read in vv. 26-27,

SLIDE – Mt 25:26-27

26 “His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? 27 Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

You talk about tough love. God is always tougher and always more loving than any compassionate human being. If the servant had come to us and described all the reasons why he couldn't improve on his life, we would probably in the 21<sup>st</sup> century put our arm around the servant and said, "There, there, poor dear. You really are facing insurmountable obstacles. The challenges you are facing no one could ever bear up under those challenges. You've had such a hard way to go."

But that kind of unsanctified enabling, this kind of therapeutized support for excuse making does people no favor in the end. You lost your job? Well, it is OK for you to lick your wounds for a year or two before you actually go out and seek another job. You have a disability? Well, then it must be OK for you to sit at home and eat and smoke and watch TV all day. I understand that you grew up in a lousy family; I understand that your ex-spouse is a total jerk and ripped you off royally; I understand that you made terrible choices and now you find yourself in a very difficult place. But at what point do you say, "all that stuff may be true of me, but it is not the whole truth about me. The whole truth about is me that God has given me a sacred trust of life. And he is looking for a return without excuses."

Everyone, no matter what your life situation has been, no matter how many challenges are in your way, no matter how many bad choices you've made – everyone is responsible to God to develop and improve upon what has been entrusted to you. Everyone.

So, you are 40 years old, or 50 years old, or 60 years old, or 75 years old – you are still commanded by God to bring increase to the life and gifts and opportunities that have been presented to you and offered to you as a sacred trust.

One of my dearest friends in the church is a physician. A few years ago she decided that she wanted to learn to play piano. She was in her mid-40's. She said, "Rich, I decided the only way it was going to work was if I actually made myself perform at piano recitals. It was the funniest thing in the world; a 7-year old, a 9-year old, a 10-year old and then here I come – 45 years old and I'm playing this simple piece." A few years before that she took up ice-skating.

I love it. I love when I hear about people at age 60 learning new languages. I have a friend who was told her whole life that she was stupid – put down by her father; put down by her husband; put down by her siblings. She finally said, "these negative words have been challenges to me, they've been obstacles, but they are no excuse to me regarding my responsibility to God to improve on the life he has given me." She went back to school and got a bachelor's degree and then she went on to get her master's degree.

Excuse-making or opportunity-seeking.



Let me close with this story. Some years ago, our church building was being vandalized. There were kids coming in and writing on the walls, stealing things. A few people in the church said, "We need to hire guards. We need to kick these kids out of here. Let's call the police and have them arrested." But a few folks who had the mind of Jesus said, "You know, we need to be able to see past the problem. God is giving us a divine opportunity here. What if we had a program for the kids coming over so that they had some structure and supervision?" We didn't just let them hang out and write on the walls, but we saw these kids as a sacred trust from the Lord.

"What if we started a program for them?"

And so Kevin Brown,

SLIDE – Kevin Brown Picture

Formed an after-school program here called The Zone. And it has grown. We have well over 100 kids on our roster. We have about 80 who regularly attend the after-school program. We tutor them in school subjects. We do sports with the kids. We do the arts with the kids. Many of the children have come to know Christ. We've reached out to their parents and families.

When I think about pushing through the barriers and the obstacles, I think about Sam Sullivan.

SLIDE – Sam Sullivan waving the Olympic Flag

I think about a man who said about his life: If I don't get to determine the size of the box that I'm in, then with God's help I'm going to fill every square inch of this box I'm in. I'm going to explore life to the fullest, so help me God.

Amen.

## **Building A Church Without Limits**

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Rich Nathan  
April 14 & 15, 2007  
Building A Church For Others  
Matthew 25:14-30

### **I. Two Different Ways Of Doing Life**

- A. No Moral Limits vs. No Self-Imposed Limits
- B. Seeing Life As A Sacred Trust vs. Seeing Life As An Owner (Mt. 25.14, 20, 22)
- C. Being Urgent vs. Being A Procrastinator (Mt. 15.16)

### **II. The Wicked Servant (Mt. 25.24-30)**

- A. The Uncommitted Observer vs. The Committed Investor
- B. The Self-Preserving Church vs. The Risk-Taking Church
- C. Being An Excuse-Maker vs. Being An Opportunity-Seeker