

A Message Without Limits

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Blessed to be a Blessing Series

Luke 4:14-30

One of the great tragedies of the American church is the way that we restrict the message and ministry of Jesus according to our own particular version of Christianity. People miss the fullness of Jesus' person, the enormity of his message, and the scope of the range of people that he wants to reach because of church-imposed limits.

A woman in our congregation was on a search for God for many years. She began reading Christian books and going to the library to take out videotapes on the life of Jesus. A Roman Catholic priest told her that essentially her search was dangerous and what she needed to do was to simply attend Catholic Church, participate in the sacraments, celebrate the Holy Days of Obligation, and that would be enough.

It seems that virtually every stream of Christianity has severely limited the message of Jesus. The Fundamentalists have reduced the message of Jesus to the saving of your soul for heaven. Historically, Fundamentalists had no social program, no perspective on meeting basic human needs – the offering of job counseling, or feeding the hungry, or going into Third World villages and assisting in the drilling of wells for clean water. There was no room in Fundamentalist churches for psychological counseling, or for the opening of a free medical clinic. Why would you want to do that, a Fundamentalist might ask? You are wasting your time meeting basic human needs when the only thing important is saving souls for heaven.

Mainline churches limit the message of Jesus. There often is a strong social and political message coming from the Protestant Mainline churches. But you won't hear a plain message about the need for conversion, the need for a regenerating experience of the Spirit on the need to be born-again and to see the Kingdom of God. Many people attending mainline churches never discover how to have a personal relationship with God. There is a fuzziness of belief that is often present in the Protestant Mainline churches.

One person recently told me that at a particular denominational church she attended, she was literally told at the membership class that the beauty of this particular denomination was that you could believe anything and still be part of the church.

Conservative evangelicals will often restrict the teaching of Jesus to eliminate the embarrassing supernatural elements of his ministry. Many conservative

evangelical churches teach that there is no room for the practice of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, or healing, or deliverance. Conservative evangelicals have drunk so deeply from the well of enlightenment, that there is simply no grid for the possibility of God communicating through dreams, visions, or prophecy the way he did in biblical times. And there is certainly no grid for the possibility of demonic deliverance. While more and more Americans are dabbling in witchcraft and magic, conservative evangelicals offer very little to release people from demonic bondage.

The Pentecostal and charismatic wings of the church often lop off from their understanding of the Christian message any scholarship. Pentecostals and charismatics often have a very negative view of education. When Marlene and I were in college, we used to attend a church pastored by a Pentecostal pastor. After I came to Christ, he took me aside and said, "Rich, what are you wasting your time going to college for?" I was 18 years old and this older Christian man, who I deeply respected, put the press on me to quit college and to go to a little Pentecostal Bible College. By God's grace, I knew at the time that that would be wrong for me. I love school. I love learning. So I politely declined his counsel.

A couple of years later when Marlene and I were preparing to marry, he gave us marriage counsel to forsake the use of birth control. He said, "Rich, you don't need birth control. You just need to trust the Lord." I talked with Marlene afterward and said, "Well, I trust that if we don't use birth control, we will be raising 14 children."

No room for education; no room for science.

One of the things I love about the person of Jesus is that no realm of life is squeezed out by the Kingdom that he inaugurated in his coming. All of life is redeemed by Jesus Christ. The enormous scope of the message is discovered as we understand the meaning of various words in the Bible. For example, most people don't understand the meaning of the word "salvation." Salvation in the Bible does not mean: When I die, my soul goes to heaven. Salvation means the total transformation of human life. It means the forgiveness of sins. It means healing from bodily sickness. It means release from debt. It means mending of marriages, and a world safe for children. It means political liberation. Salvation involves a reversal of all the evil consequences of sin – the whole universe being free. Salvation is a really big word.

There is another important word in Hebrew that speaks about the scope of the Christian message. That word is "shalom." I've talked with you about this before. Shalom means wholeness. It is translated by such English words as "completeness, soundness, peace, well-being, health, prosperity, salvation." Shalom is not just an inward, private relationship that we have with God. Shalom is peace where there is war and violence. Shalom is economic justice where

there is poverty. Shalom is the breaking down of racial barriers and the experience of God's love and righteousness.

Ray Bakke, in his great book on ministry in the city titled, *A Theology As Big As The City*, says that Isaiah 65 provides for us a picture of what a city would be like if it would begin to experience the shalom of God. Isaiah 65:17-25,

SLIDE

Isa 65:17 "Behold, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.

Isa 65:18 But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.

Isa 65:19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.

Isa 65:20 "Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
he who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere youth;
he who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.

Isa 65:21 They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

Isa 65:22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the works of their hands.

Isa 65:23 They will not toil in vain
or bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
they and their descendants with them.

Isa 65:24 Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.

Isa 65:25 The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
but dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy

on all my holy mountain,”
says the LORD.

If a city like the city of Columbus began to experience God’s shalom there would be public celebrations and happiness, verses 17-18,

SLIDE

Isa 65:17 “Behold, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
Isa 65:18 But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.

There would be public health for children and the aged, verse 20,

SLIDE

Isa 65:20 “Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
he who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere youth;
he who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.

There would be housing for all, verse 21,

SLIDE

Isa 65:21 They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

There would be food for all, verse 22,

SLIDE

Isa 65:22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the works of their hands.

There would be meaningful work, verse 22-23a,

SLIDE

Isa 65:22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the works of their hands.

Isa 65:23 They will not toil in vain
or bear children doomed to misfortune;

There would be a family support system, verse 23,

SLIDE

Isa 65:23 They will not toil in vain
or bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
they and their descendants with them.

And there would be an absence of violence, verse 25,

SLIDE

Isa 65:25 The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
but dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,"
says the LORD.

Brothers and sisters, the reason we are building a community center, and we are planning to expand our involvement in world missions is because Vineyard Columbus has caught a glimpse of the shalom of God. We've caught a glimpse of the kingdom of God and what God wants for the city of Columbus. We've caught a glimpse for cities in Zambia, Tanzania, Central Asia and Brazil.

One of the ways that you can measure the health of a church, whether you would want to be part of the church, one of the ways you can measure the truth of a message, or the value of a Christian ministry is to ask yourself if some aspect of life is squeezed out by this church. Is there an aspect of life that is squeezed out by this ministry and message so that there is no room for education or science, politics, or the arts – music or the visual arts? Is there room for all types of people? Is there room in this particular church for ordinary, non-elite people, for women or minorities, for political liberals and conservatives, for Democrats and Republicans, the successful, the poor, for single parents, or for children? Does the church have a heart for the entire city it is living in? Does the church have a heart for the world, for unreached people groups?

When you are picking a church and listening to a message, or you are evaluating a ministry – ask yourself, has this particular group lopped off significant parts of the ministry and message that we read about in the New Testament and reduced it down to something that is all too human and all too subject to the church's control or the preferences of the people in the church? Is it just birds of a feather flock together?

We meet in Jesus a big God who has a big message. I've called today's talk "A Message Without Limits." Let's pray.

Luke 4:14-21

SLIDE

Lk 4:14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.

Lk 4:15 He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

Lk 4:16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read.

Lk 4:17 The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

Lk 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me

to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,

to release the oppressed,

Lk 4:19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Lk 4:20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.

The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him,

Lk 4:21 and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Lk 4:22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.

Lk 4:23 Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.' "

Lk 4:24 "I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown.

Lk 4:25 I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land.

Lk 4:26 Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

Lk 4:27 And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

Lk 4:28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

Lk 4:29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.
Lk 4:30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

We read in verse 14:

SLIDE

Lk 4:14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.

The Holy Spirit figures very prominently in the writings of Luke in the New Testament, both in the gospel of Luke and in the book of Acts. In some churches, the Holy Spirit is barely mentioned, and if he is mentioned it is awkward or with a degree of embarrassment. Whenever you think of salvation, you ought to think of salvation as a two-sided coin. One side of salvation concerns the forgiveness of our sins.

But the forgiveness of sins is certainly not the whole of salvation. The other side of the coin concerns the gift of the Holy Spirit, what the Bible calls the new birth, being born again. You are born once physically, but you need to be born again spiritually.

Now, forgiveness is a big part of what it means to be a saved person. Forgiveness deals with our past and it removes the guilt of our sins in the past. But the gift of the Holy Spirit transforms our futures. The gift of the Spirit gives us the potential to live different lives.

The apostle Peter sums up Jesus' ministry this way in Acts 10:37-38.

SLIDE

Ac 10:37 You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—

Ac 10:38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

And in Acts 1:8, Jesus says right before his ascension:

SLIDE

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

The Holy Spirit is frequently associated with power in the New Testament.

You say, “Well, why do I need the power of the Holy Spirit?”

When you get a handle on the size of the task that has been entrusted to you as a Christian, namely to spread the gospel to the world, to your family, your coworkers, your friends, and your neighbors, and not only to preach the gospel, but to demonstrate the gospel in healing, ministry to the poor, tutoring kids, feeding people, and deliverance – when you get a handle on the size of the message that has been entrusted to you – a message with out limits - and you get a handle on the greatness of the opposition that faces you, the power of the enemy to blind people’s minds, as Paul says in 2 Cor. 4:4 when he says:

SLIDE

The God of this age blinded the eyes of unbelievers so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

When you see the enormity of the opposition from Satan, and the false philosophies and trivial pursuits that people give themselves to, and in addition when you recognize your own utter inadequacy to fulfill the task in light of the opposition, you will cry out for the power of the Holy Spirit.

So often someone from the church will come up to me and say, “You know, I considered this particular ministry in the church. I was thinking about leading a small group, or teaching in this particular setting, at one of the local prisons, or a women’s group. I was thinking about becoming a peer counselor, a marriage peer counselor, or working in children’s ministry, but I really feel inadequate.” They think that in sharing that with me that their sense of personal inadequacy will let them off the hook.

I almost always want to say with affection, “Well, it’s good that you have now come to the recognition that you are inadequate. Of course you are. How could you or I ever think that we could produce spiritual fruit in someone else’s life apart from the power of the Holy Spirit? Of course we are inadequate. Now that we’ve gotten that truth out of the way, what are we going to do about it?”

Cry out for the power of the Holy Spirit!

Friend, may I ask you a personal question? Have you ever had a felt experience of the Holy Spirit? How long has it been since you had an experience with the Holy Spirit that you know that you know that the Spirit of God has fallen upon you? Have you ever felt empowered by the Holy Spirit? Have you gone after the Holy Spirit? Have you asked your small group leader to pray for you to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Have you considered signing up for our class on healing or our Holy Spirit weekend retreat where you might experience more of the Spirit’s presence?

Our church needs to say every day, and especially as we are planning this huge new forward thrust into our city via the community center, and into the world via world missions: Apart from you, Jesus, I can do nothing. Our whole church needs to say to God, before anything that we are going to do, "Holy Spirit, I want to welcome you at a personal level. I want to welcome your presence. I need your power. Come fill me and allow me to feel your presence, Lord."

The Savior's power came from his dependence on the Holy Spirit. We read in verse 16:

SLIDE

Lk 4:16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read.

We have here perhaps the oldest written account of a synagogue service in history. Jesus was an observant Jew, not just a cultural Jew. The setting of many of Jesus' teachings in the gospels is the synagogue.

In those days a rabbi was not hired by the synagogue to deliver the message. Apparently, the message could be delivered by anyone the synagogue ruler deemed suitable. Jesus, as an itinerant rabbi, as an itinerant teacher, was frequently invited to speak. And as much as we can determine, the liturgy of the synagogue back then involved the saying of a prayer, the Shema: "Here O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." And it involved the reading of the Torah, the five books of Moses. And there probably was a reading from the prophets that is called the Haphtorah.

It is unclear if the reading from the prophets was the assigned portion at that time and it just providentially happened that Isaiah 61 was the portion of scripture to be read, or if Jesus chose the portion. But, we read in Luke 4:18,

SLIDE

Lk 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,

What do we learn about Jesus, the one empowered by the Spirit? He said he came to preach good news to the poor.

Everyone in the world has a message of good news to the wealthy. Car companies have messages of good news to the wealthy. Here's a new feature, our car will warn you if you are getting too close to another vehicle. Our car can automatically adjust our seat to your backside. Our car has individually heated

spaces for you and your passengers. Everyone has good news for the wealthy. Travel companies do. Restaurants do. Toy stores. Who offers good news to the poor? The people who have nothing? Only Jesus and those who love Jesus.

There is always good news for the wealthy. The wealthy always have access to people in power. The wealthy always get good news in terms of tax deferments for their businesses, tax rebates, and beautiful new roads built to their shopping centers and their new housing developments. But Jesus' message, this message without limits, involves good news for the poor.

The poor are used to getting bad news. Here in America we build expressways over their homes, chop up their neighborhoods, put halfway houses for drug abusers and child molesters on the streets of poor neighborhoods. We give the poor a radically unjust tax system designed to perpetually give them the worst schools. We cut welfare rolls and demand that the poor earn their way in the world, which by the way, I really support. I totally support taking personal responsibility for your own life and your own family. But we offer almost no childcare, job training, or public transportation. We offer very little by way of a hand up when we remove the handout. Only Jesus and those who love Jesus offer good news to the poor.

How important are the poor to Jesus? James Forbes is the pastor of the famous Riverside Church in New York City. He preached a powerful message on Matthew 25 in which Jesus speaks of the hungry, the homeless, strangers, prisoners, the sick. And in Matt. 25 Jesus promises that he will challenge his followers on the day of Judgment with these words, Matt. 25:45-46,

SLIDE

Mt 25:45 "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

Mt 25:46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

James Forbes concluded his message saying: No one gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor. What an arresting statement. I applied it to my own life. Could I get a letter of reference from the poor recommending to Jesus that he let me into heaven? Is there any poor person who would stand up for me on the Day of Judgment who would say: You ought to let him in. He helped me when I was in need that time when I was on the street. He gave me some money from his own pockets. He bought me some food. He gave me his coat. He paid for heat in my house, or gas in my car. Friend, could you produce a letter of recommendation from the poor?

The poor are people who have no access. They have no power. They are the excluded, the marginalized. They are the people we step over on our way to doing God's business in the world.

The gospel of Luke has a particular bent toward the poor. In fact, Luke opens with Mary, Jesus' mother, singing these words. Luke 1:53,

SLIDE

Lk 1:53 He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

In the gospel of Luke we read a parable about a rich fool. We read a story of a rich man and Lazarus. We read about the repentance of Zacharias and the Pharisees who were lovers of money. It is impossible to read the gospel of Luke without being presented with the question: Whose side do you think God is on – the powerful or the poor? Whose side is God on – the bully or the victim, the favorite or the underdog?

As I read the gospel of Luke, it raises all kinds of issues for me. I read Jesus' words, Luke 4:18,

SLIDE

Lk 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,

God is on the side of the weak! God is on the side of the marginalized. That has implications for our child raising. Jesus is saying: Parents, teach your children to stand up for other kids who are being picked on. Jesus is saying: Teach your children to play with kids at school who no one else will play with.

SLIDE

Lk 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.

What does that mean in terms of business in America? There is a business lesson in here. How does your company distribute Christmas bonuses? Do a few executives, a few partners grab almost all of the Christmas bonus money and leave a few percent to be distributed among the rest of the staff – the managers, and all the secretaries. Do you take 95% and then distribute the remaining 5% among everyone else?

Good news for the poor. As you read the gospel of Luke, there is a continual demand on those who are well off to use their wealth and power not only to

benefit themselves, but to benefit those who are on the margins – the poor. If you have access to political power, then do something with your political power to help the poor.

One of the politicians that I very much admire is Rep. Tony Hall, who was a congressman from Dayton for over a decade. He is a thorough-going Christian, a man who has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize on several occasions. Tony Hall is thoroughly pro-life. He was mentored by Bill Bright, of Campus Crusade for Christ. Bill Bright challenged him and said: Do you think it is time to start to bring God into the work place? Tony Hall agreed, but didn't know how. He felt that God was often used for political purposes. But as he began to read the scriptures, he said they began to come alive to me. These are his own words. "There are at least a couple of thousand verses in the bible that deal with the poor. In 1989, after the death of Congressman Micky Leland, I took over as the chair of the Select Committee on Hunger. We passed lots of budgets that year, food aid, child survival activity, immunizing children, the development of systems, and paved the way for laws today."

Tony Hall said he faced a lot of challenges because there were high deficits. Congress cut his Hunger Committee. Hall said: "I said this is crazy. My budget was only \$600,000. I was mad. So I felt I should fast. I went on a water-only fast for 22 days."

He was asked: "Did you think your political career might be over?"

Tony Hall said: "My staff thought this was the end of my career. But I was going to fast until something major happened. A whole lot started to happen. Students at thousands of high schools around the country started to fast with me, and at a couple of hundred universities. Newspapers began to take notice. A non-profit agency called the Congressional Hunger Center was formed. They have a national conference on hunger based around the fast. Billions of dollars over the years have been raised to fight hunger. It was a fast unto the Lord to break the chains of injustice. I was amazed by what God did."

You have access to political power? Do something on behalf of the poor. If you have access to financial power, then do something with your money to help the poor.

Let me tell you about a man named Don Harris. Don Harris recognized that in the US most net worth was found in people's homes. Homeowners get better tax breaks than renters. A home is one of the few appreciating assets that people own. But Don realized that many people with full-time jobs and good credit are unable to obtain home loans because they are never able to save enough money for the down payment.

Then Don noticed something else. Most sellers sell their homes for 3-7% below their asking price. He put these two pieces of information together and began the Nehemiah Corporation, built around a 3-way cycle. Nehemiah Corporation gives potential homeowners with good credit, but no savings, 3% of the asking price under these conditions: The homeowner pay the asking price of the house; and the seller rebates 3% to Nehemiah Corporation.

It is a brilliant solution that required the right guy with a good head on his shoulders and a desire to use his position to help the poor. Since 1997 Nehemiah Corporation has assisted over 160,000 families to buy homes. And they've provided more than \$600 million dollars in down payments. You have a good mind for business? Then use it on behalf of the poor.

Does the name Bill Gates Senior mean anything to you? He is the father of Bill Gates, Jr., the founder of Microsoft. He also helps to run his son's multi-billion dollar foundation. He is a very active Episcopalian. He co-authored a book titled *Wealth and Commonwealth: Why America Should Tax Accumulated Fortunes*. Here is what Bill Gates, Sr. says:

Judaism, Christianity and Islam all affirm the right of individual ownership and private property. But there are moral limits imposed on absolute private ownership of wealth and property. Each tradition affirms that we are not individuals alone, but exist in community – a community that makes claims upon us. The notion that “it is all mine” is a violation of these teachings and traditions...society's claim on individual accumulated wealth is a fundamentally American notion rooted in recognition of society's direct and indirect investment in an individual's success. In other words, we didn't get here on our own.

Gates, Sr. goes on and says:

I believe that one's obligations to society grow in proportion to how much one has benefited. In other words, the more you have, the more you owe.

That's not me talking. That is one of the wealthiest men in the world speaking.

Well, what if you don't have very much? Then you do what you can do. If you don't have money and have some time, volunteer as a tutor here for a couple of hours a week to help teach kids reading. Come down to the food pantry that we run on 5th Avenue on Saturday morning and pack up some bags of groceries, or pray for folks lined up for food. If you don't have money, then volunteer some time.

I got a letter this week from a woman in our congregation who didn't have any money. Our church helps out church members who lack the basic necessities. Here is what she wrote:

“To the Vineyard, I want to say thank you. We had no heat and you helped pay so we could be warm. Now my house has sold and I’m pleased to be able to give back with a warm heart.”

Then she listed what she was giving back out of the money she made on selling her home. She gave the church back the \$600 we gave her with no strings attached. We never ever ask for money back that we give away. She gave the \$600 back that we gave her for her heat. This is a single mom. In addition, she gave \$700 to help two Russian Jews immigrate to Israel. She gave \$100 to an orphanage.

She concludes her letter saying: “Please pray for my son and me as the house has sold and we will be looking for another home. And pray for the peace of Jerusalem. P.S. And pray for a Christian husband, for as God said, we are not to be unequally yoked. So please pray for a Christian husband for me.”

I heard someone once asked the question: If your church ceased to exist, would anyone notice? As I think about that statement: If your church ceased to exist, would anyone notice, I said to the Lord: Lord, I don’t only want people in the city of Columbus to notice if Vineyard was here or not here, but in your mercy, may the poor in this city weep if Vineyard Columbus ceased to exist.

Now, I believe it is harder in 21st century America for the well off to be connected to the poor than at any other time in history. See, historically people used to be mixed together in a community. The poor lived near the wealthy. But now our communities, our schools and our workplaces, all across America are segregated by economics and race. How can a middle class person get connected with a poor person so that we might actually have a relationship, a friendship, so that we in the middle class could be good news to the poor?

That’s where the community center comes in. See, for me, the ideal church is a church that would have a lot of successful, high achieving, well-educated people and a lot of struggling, poor people – single moms, kids in single parent families, and homeless people. With the community center being a safe place of connecting where we could get to know one another without feeling threatened by each other, or being intimidated by one another. The better-off could begin to use their skills – their legal skills, their medical skills, their skills in resume writing or career counseling, their skills in IT or real estate, or building marriages, or families, or art, or music, or sports coaching, the better-off could use their skills to assist and train a poor person. But this is not just a one way transaction. What do the poor bring to the table?

I believe that including the poor in our church is a matter of our own spiritual survival. Do you want to know what the poor bring to the table? Many of them bring with them the presence of God. Do you want to know why so many suburban churches are so spiritually dead despite the fact that they have great

teaching, great choirs, and great facilities? Do you want to know why so many suburban churches feel so dead? It is because there are no poor folks present.

What does the apostle James say in James 2:5?

SLIDE

Jas 2:5 Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

Vineyard Columbus is not stupid. We read our Bibles here. We want people who are rich in faith sowing faith everywhere in our church. We want to be a church that is spiritually alive. We want people coming towards us to bring to us the presence and power of God. We want lots of risk takers to come towards us. We want to be like this woman, whose testimony I just read, who is living a flat-out, abandoned life for God. We want people weaving into the very fabric of this church total dependence on the Lord.

The poor often offer us the thread of faith that we need.

The message of Jesus offers freedom without limits. We read in verse 18:

SLIDE

Lk 4:18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,

Three times in this text there is a promise of freedom made. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Freedom is more than a state of mind. Liberation always involves both God and our neighbor. The church has often limited freedom to something vertical, something inward. You know, we experience inner-freedom. Liberation is more than that. Liberation is also political.

The Bible speaks so much about freedom and liberation everywhere. Liberation, freedom, the breaking of bondage is often used in the Bible as the picture of salvation. What is the model of salvation in the Old Testament? What is the paradigm? It is the freeing of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. And we see the Israelites not only set free in Egypt, but also set free from captivity by the Assyrians and set free in Babylon. In Jesus' day people were waiting to be set free from Roman oppressors. Freedom, at least in part, is political.

This is Black History Month and there have been some fantastic programs on PBS. There was a great mini-series on slavery in America, and also a wonderful biography of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The abolitionists who fought against slavery, and Dr. King, often referred to biblical promises of political freedom. The Civil Rights movement in our country did not read Jesus' words as simply spiritual words. They are political words.

Likewise, the Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu, who won a Nobel Prize back in the 1980's, did not read these words promising freedom simply as spiritual words. They are political words.

Jesus offers another picture of freedom, in verse 19,

SLIDE

Lk 4:19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

He is talking about the Jubilee. At some point, the weights need to be rebalanced. Poverty, according to God, cannot go from generation to generation. Slaves need to be set free; debts need to be cancelled; the land needs to be redistributed to its rightful owners. The freedom Jesus came to bring includes freedom from debt.

And it doesn't matter to God how people got that way. The wealthy may have gotten theirs by old fashioned work and persistence and self-discipline. The poor may be poor because of negligence, laziness and drunkenness. Of course, things are never that stark in real life. But even if they were, God said in the Old Testament that the scales need to be rebalanced every so often so that people are not permanently caught in a cycle of poverty.

Maybe in our community center we can help people rebalance the scales. Maybe if people got vocational training, or if people got computer training, or some other kinds of skills, maybe if men and women in our church started small businesses, maybe a few dozen families, maybe a few hundred families could experience the liberation Jesus came to bring. Maybe if we helped single dads to connect with their families and take responsibility for the kids they have, maybe lots of at-risk kids could experience liberation.

Maybe if we helped create development projects in Africa, if we adopted AIDS orphans, if we helped to build orphanages, or started businesses in Brazil, or planted churches in Muslim cities, maybe, as Christians, we could begin to rebalance the scales.

But Jesus didn't simply come to offer political freedom. He also offers us spiritual freedom. The message of freedom cannot be limited to economics or politics. It has to include our relationship with God.

Jesus came to set us free from guilt. In verse 18 we read that Jesus said he came to release the oppressed. A great alternative word for release that is often used in the New Testament – is forgiveness. Forgiveness literally releases you from the guilt of your sins.

The great English preacher, John Stott, once said that no one is free who hasn't been forgiven. It is absolutely the case that when you drag around in your life the weight of regret concerning something you have done, something you have said, the kind of parent you are, the kind of spouse, what you did in relationship with a friend or a parent, or child, the hurt you've caused, or a duty you've neglected, if you carry around the weight of regret or guilt, you are not free.

A famous psychiatrist named Hobart Mowrer wrote a book back in the 60's titled, *The Crisis of Psychiatry and Religion*. Dr. Mowrer said that a very significant percentage of people are in mental institutions because they have unresolved guilt. He said that many of his patients are suffering from neuroses and psychoses and that if you could just simply find healing for guilt, many of the things we call psychiatric problems would be resolved. Reading from Dr. Mowrer's book, he writes:

As long as a person lives under the shadow of real unacknowledged and unexpiated guilt, that person cannot accept himself. He will continue to hate himself and to suffer the inevitable consequences of self-hatred. But the moment a person begins to accept his guilt and his sinfulness, the possibility of radical change opens up and with this a new freedom of self-respect and peace.

Jesus came to open up the way of forgiveness for us. Through his death on the cross, Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. At the cross, Jesus became the sin-bearer. And he invites us to come to him and place our sins, our omissions, our failures upon him. To unburden our souls of our own guilt and sin and place them upon him. Psalm 130:3,4 says,

SLIDE

Ps 130:4 But with you there is forgiveness;
therefore you are feared.

Friend, do you know in your life the reality of Psalm 130:4? But with God there is forgiveness? Do you live with a sense of freedom because you know that you know you have been forgiven? Or do you live with a constant sense of accusation, dragging around with you regrets of the past, the could-haves and would-haves and should-haves.

The people, when they heard Jesus, and when they heard his application of these words, were infuriated. In fact, we read in verse 28-30,

SLIDE

Lk 4:28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

Lk 4:29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.

Lk 4:30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Why were the people so upset? They were upset first of all because Jesus left out of his reading from Isaiah 61 one important statement. In Isaiah 61:1-2, we read these words:

SLIDE

Isa 61:1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,

because the LORD has anointed me

to preach good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,

to proclaim freedom for the captives

and release from darkness for the prisoners,

Isa 61:2 to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor

and the day of vengeance of our God,

to comfort all who mourn,

But Jesus left out the phrase: And the day of vengeance on our God. When Jesus applied the year of the Lord's favor, he applied it not only to the Jews of his day, but to their non-Jewish enemies. It was like standing up in a mosque in Palestine and telling Palestinians: Allah not only wants to bless us, but Allah wants to bless the Israelis.

This giving campaign is all about God's huge heart for the world. Jesus is not offering us the stuff of the typical Hollywood movie. What is the typical Hollywood movie? The hero is ripped off and he spends the rest of the movie blowing away people who cheated him. Mel Gibson in Payback. He was shot and left for dead. He takes care of his friend and former wife and corrupt police, and the whole Asian gang. Or Jim Caviezel in the Count of Monte Cristo, who exacts exquisite revenge from the son of a count who falsely imprisons him. Or what about Revenge of the Nerds, or Kill Bill, or An Eye For An Eye, or any one of a thousand Hollywood movies. They are all about our very human desire for vengeance on our enemies.

But Jesus changes the story line. He offers unlimited forgiveness to anyone who repents, even people who abuse us, even people who rip us off, even people who cheat us. There is forgiveness.

We are constantly faced with a choice, friend, concerning what we are going to do with this unlimited forgiveness. We can get angry with the message, like the people in Nazareth did. You don't understand. Do you know what it is like to be oppressed? Do you know what it is like to be abused? You don't understand, Jesus. Could you possibly suggest that our enemies could experience and receive the favor of God?

I want to share with you in closing a video of a couple in our church, who embraced Jesus' message of forgiveness, and are now passing it along to others. Their names are Stan and Laurie Carlisle.

VIDEO – STAN AND LAURIE CARLISLE

Brothers and sisters, this message of the Kingdom of God, this message of the shalom of God is a huge message. What we are saying by our plans to build the community center and expand our involvement in world missions is Vineyard Columbus is ready to take a step of embracing more of the message of Christ. Let's pray.

A Message Without Limits

Rich Nathan

February 12-13, 2005

Blessed to be a Blessing Series

Luke 4:14-30

- I. A Message That Churches Often Limit

- II. A Message That Requires Power Without Limits (Lk. 4:14,16)

- III. A Message That Includes People Without Limits (Lk. 4:18)
 - A. Good News For The Poor

 - B. Judgment And The Poor (Mt. 25:45,46)

 - C. Power Employed For The Poor

 - D. The Church's Need Of The Poor (Jas. 2:5)

- IV. A Message That Offers True Freedom Without Limits (Lk. 4:18b, 19)
 - A. Political Freedom

 - B. Spiritual Freedom

- V. A Message That Offers Forgiveness Without Limits (Lk. 4:20, 21)