

A Church That Takes Risks

Rich Nathan

February 5-6, 2005

Blessed to be a Blessing Series

Luke 10:25-37

Most of you know by now that we are in the middle of a giving campaign, a campaign that will culminate on Thursday evening, March 10th. We are going to meet down at the Columbus Convention Center as an entire church at 7:30 in the evening for a night I think will be an extraordinary celebration. We are going to combine all of the people in our four services together. The church will get a chance to meet the church.

It is that evening that you will have the opportunity to make a three-year commitment to the building of our community center and to the expansion of our involvement in world missions. I strongly urge each one of you to cancel any plans that you might have for Thursday, March 10th. I also strongly encourage you to bring your children. We will not have a separate children's program. We want the kids to be involved in this night. It will be a night for the entire Vineyard church family to be together.

If you feel that your kids are simply too young to take out at 7:30 in the evening for a program that will last about an hour and a half, then you need to make arrangements for childcare now. That is why I'm announcing it this far in advance. Don't pull someone else out of church to watch your kids. Husbands and wives, don't one of you stay home. Do try to get someone else. We will have a little room in the back. If you have a toddler and you want to bring your toddler and have them play with you in the back of the room, that would be okay.

But I urge you to pull your kids out of their school activities and sports. Make arrangements for someone else to cover your shift at work. Thursday, March 10th is going to be a special night in the history of this church. At this service you will be asked to make a 3-year pledge to build our new community center and to expand world missions over and above your normal tithe.

So, I've asked you to spend some time with the Lord and ask him regarding the nature of your gift. Leaders of our church are going to be asked to make their commitments ahead of time on March 4th at a leadership dessert in accordance with the scriptural pattern of leaders going first in giving. But then the whole church will make its commitment on March 10th.

We've had some extraordinary responses to the request for people to fast and prayer. Over 1500 of you responded last weekend to the request to take a day or more and to fast. We still have cards available in the lobby area and will put them in the bulletin next week. If you didn't sign up to take a day in the next five

weeks to fast and pray for what God wants to accomplish in our new community center and through world missions, then I want to ask you to sign up for that.

In the past month, I've also asked you to send in a personal testimony. It doesn't have to be long. But we want you to send a testimony of some way that you've been blessed through the ministry of this church. Perhaps you were saved here, or you have recommitted your life to Christ here, found friendships in small groups here, got ministered to, received counseling, got taught. So, if something has happened in the life of one of your children, or perhaps God has used you to bring blessing to others, we want to hear from you. So, in your bulletin there is an insert concerning the testimony.

But I want to share with you a testimony I received from a member of our congregation. I will keep it anonymous.

Today's sermon at church as always was intriguing and spoke to our soul. When you mentioned that once we join the University of Jesus, Jesus will assign the curriculum for us, it reminded me of my situation and my life direction since my salvation in 1996.

Before my salvation, anytime my path crossed the low income families or homeless people, I compared them with myself and saying that "I came from a foreign country and did not know anything about this country and I barely spoke English. Then I worked hard to attend school to further educate myself so I could get a good job and prepare a comfortable life for myself and my family. Thus this country is the land of opportunity and if anyone is poor or homeless then it is their own fault not to apply themselves for pursuing a better life.

It was shortly after my salvation that God put into my heart to start volunteering at Food Pantry. I have been involved with Food pantry for about 7 years now (except for a 1.5 years interim during 1999-2000 that I did not attend). It was about 2 years ago when I was wondering what my purpose is at the food pantry and ask God to show me His plan that He has for me. As soon as I ask God for the clarification God told me "Do you remember anytime you passed thru low income neighborhood or saw homeless people, you blamed them for their life style and said "if anyone is poor or homeless then it is their own fault not to apply themselves for pursuing a better life", Now I want you to serve the same people because I love them and I want you to love them and serve them too.

It was such a humbling revelation for me that 1) God know my heart before my salvation, 2) He was gracious to forgive me for my sinful attitude and accept me as his own child, 3) Signing me for the course in University of Jesus to teach me humbleness, 4) He never revealed to me the reason for my desire to volunteer at Food pantry until 2 years ago after I asked him.

As you said in your Blessed to be Blessing Series sermon, I truly feel blessed by serving at the Food Pantry which is a kingdom based mercy ministry and I am thankful that VCC is providing such an excellent ministry to reach out to the community. My prayer is that God continue to bless the church and FOTV ministries and to provide the resources to build the new Community Center so we can use it to reach out to our neighbors and expand Jesus ministry throughout our community.

Here is a man, who I so respect in our church, who was willing to be stretched by Christ to go past some of his old prejudices and fears.

You know, we live in a society right now that is ruled by fear. In the 1950's, what were people doing? They were digging bomb shelters in their backyards. Hundreds of thousands bomb shelters still exist all over America. In the 1970's people were moving to the country and learning survival skills to prepare for the coming depression. In the 1980's Christians were urged to get rid of their stocks and bonds because the stock market was surely going to crash and Christians were told to accept nothing but gold. In the 1990's we were faced, of course, with Y2K. And now, in our post 9/11 world, we have apocalyptic visions of other terrorist attacks.

Certainly the swing in America, whether we are talking about handgun legislation, or legislation that permits the invasion of privacy, we are surrounded by fear-based thinking. Do you want a quick measure of the fear-based index in America? Just look at people's choices of dogs. In 1975 little sissy poodles, with their bows, were the most popular pure-bred dog in the US. There were 140,000 registered poodles in America in 1975. And there were only 952 registered rottweillers. In 1995, twenty years later, the poodle population went down to 60,000 and the rottweillers had increased over 100 times to 102,000. And that trend is continuing.

I don't believe it is because the rottweillers ate the poodles. I think it says something about fear.

What we are proposing as a church in building a community center that reaches out to our city and in sending out missionaries is the rejection of fear-based thinking. We continue, in this church, to believe that God is greater than all the things we fear and that God calls his people to put themselves on the line and to risk. I've called today's talk, very simply, A Church That Takes Risk. Let's pray.

Luke 10:25-37

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Lk 10:25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Lk 10:26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

Lk 10:27 He answered: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Lk 10:28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

Lk 10:29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Lk 10:30 In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

Lk 10:31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

Lk 10:32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

Lk 10:33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.

Lk 10:34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him.

Lk 10:35 The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

Lk 10:36 “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

Lk 10:37 The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Of course, many of you are familiar with this story. It is the parable of the Good Samaritan. It begins with the challenge by a lawyer. We read in verse 25,

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Lk 10:25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Lawyers in Jesus’ day were also called scribes. They not only copied the scriptures, however, but they interpreted the scriptures and applied general instructions to daily life. And over time an enormous body of interpretation and custom developed, which came to be as binding as the written law itself. Because these men were so learned in both the written law and their oral tradition, they often became law teachers. They formed schools around their interpretations of the law. The lawyers were also sought out to be judges over various disputes.

So this man who stood up to challenge Jesus was not some ambulance chaser, or a guy hanging around the courthouse passing out his business card. This man was a community leader, a judge, a law professor and preacher. He was a very formidable opponent to Jesus. And he asked Jesus a question.

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“Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Now, there are always people who love a good argument. At some point, every Christian will encounter a person who wants to argue with you about the Christian faith. Maybe right now you have someone in your life like that – someone who wants to debate about the Bible, or about God’s existence, or about God’s goodness, someone who is arguing with you about *The DaVinci Code* or someone at work might argue with you about your perspective on homosexual practices. A parent might argue with you about why you are considering getting baptized as an adult since you went through a perfectly good baptism as an infant in your parent’s church. Someone at your school might say that science has disproved the Bible.

Those of you who consider yourselves followers of Christ, do you have any debaters, any arguers in your life? Have you, in the past, encountered a religious debater, someone who really enjoys arguing with you about your Christian faith? Some of you who do not consider yourselves yet to be Christian might see yourselves as debaters, arguers.

I’ve discovered that debaters, arguers, generally fall into one of two categories. Some people argue passionately against the Christian faith because they are true seekers. Many teenagers and young adult children of Christians are in this category. They argue with their parents and teachers, but what they really want is to be proven wrong. They are saying with every argument, give me a reason to believe. Give me something solid and real to build my life on. Give me something that I can be passionate about and that I can give myself to.

I love meeting these types of debaters, who want nothing more than to be proven wrong. They say: I have a hard time believing, help me. I want to believe.

But there is another kind of debater, who uses arguments to keep the Lord and his claims over their lives at arm’s length.

Friend, it is impossible to break free of God. The walls of argument that we build do not reach up to heaven. In fact, the Bible says in Acts 17:27b-28

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though he is not far from each one of us.

Ac 17:28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’

Some people have had unsettling encounters with God in childhood, through the haunting voice of conscience in the middle of the night, through unasked for spiritual experiences, or near death encounters – there are many folks who have God interrupt them at some point in their life. This second group of arguers debate not so they can be convinced, but so they can silence the disturbing

message within themselves. They argue so that they won't have to consider Jesus Christ.

You see, something is going on when a person passionately argues. There are folks who simply don't care, folks who have had limited contact with God, folks who shrug their shoulders and say: Whatever.

This lawyer fit into the second category of people. He was arguing so that he would not really have to consider the claims of Christ. This lawyer saw Jesus lay his hands on people and heal them. He heard Jesus pray as no man had ever prayed. He heard Jesus pray with so much reality and intimacy with God. He heard Jesus teach with incredible authority, insight, and wisdom. So this lawyer cannot go on pretending that Jesus is just another religious teacher. Something happened in his life. He had a disturbing encounter with Christ.

And I believe many, many people have had disturbing encounters sometime in their lives. And the lawyer, like many other folks, had a choice to make about whether he will sign up to be a follower of Christ, or for a thousand personal, political, and economic reasons choose not to be a follower of Christ. And he takes the latter course and he needs to shut Jesus up.

So the lawyer says to himself: I will debate Jesus and prove to myself that following him is not an option. In fact, this whole business of the Christian faith is so complicated and can be looked at in so many different ways. I'll erect a web of arguments so dense that I won't have to deal with Christ and his word bugging me at 2:30 in the morning when my house is dead quiet. In fact, I am looking forward to digging my teeth into this Galilean preacher. Let's have some fun with him. He can't possibly know the law any better than me. After all, I've studied both sides of every legal debate and I can quote authorities going back centuries. And so he asks:

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"Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

If Jesus answers "Do the law," then I will ask him, "Which law?" Once he mentions a law, then I will ask, "How do you interpret that law? Which side do you take on the following 100 issues?"

But Jesus doesn't debate with him. And this is the frustrating thing for those of us who argue with God, isn't it? The Lord won't argue back. He doesn't play fair. He simply will not play according to our rules. Have you noticed that about God? When you want to debate a point with God, he won't debate with you.

- Why should I stay in this rotten marriage? I have a million reasons to leave. You need to answer everyone of my reasons. You need to convince me, God.

And there is just total silence. Or there is a question posed to our minds: Will you trust me or not? Will you obey me or not?

We experience a traumatic loss, maybe through a death or romantic breakup, or we have financial crash, there is an illness and we scream at God and say: How can you call yourself good when you allowed this to happen? What kind of God would leave me so abandoned and so alone? Answer me, I demand a response. Tell me what this happened. And like Job in the Old Testament, we get nothing.

Have you ever tried to debate with Jesus Christ? Have you ever shouted to the sky: Prove yourself to me. I am struggling in my faith. Give me some sign, something I can hang on to, offer an explanation for your behavior. But he won't play according to our rules.

In this case, Christ merely poses a question. Luke 10:26,

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Lk 10:26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

So the lawyer answers Jesus with a summary of the law in verses 27,

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Lk 10:27 He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Which Jesus approves of in verse 28,

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Lk 10:28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

One of the most unfortunate developments in Christian history over the last 150 years is the separation of these two great commands so that they are seen as alternatives to each other. Churches today can be separated into two camps based on which of the two commandments they choose to follow.

One category is the conservative camp. It focuses on loving God. Conservative churches, the evangelical churches, do Bible studies, have theology classes and seminars on prayer. But the conservative church is almost entirely vertical. There is no horizontal message. It is all about "me and Jesus." How can I be right with God? How can I personally grow in my relationship with God? How can I know more about God?

But there is no horizontal message. What is my responsibility to my neighbor? How should I relate to the poor in this city, and to the poor in this world?

Conservatives rarely ponder the question: Well, God has blessed me, now what does that mean in terms of me being a blessing to others, to people who have less than me? How can I not just store up everything for myself, but be a conduit for my resources for others?

On the other hand, the liberal church talks a lot about loving our neighbor. In the liberal church there will be lots of focus on deeds towards others and third world debt relief, and housing projects, activism about welfare reform, seminars on war and peace. But unfortunately in the liberal church there is often no vertical element. Liberal churches have lost any emphasis on a relationship with a personal God. In liberal churches it is as if men and women could live by bread alone and we didn't need the bread of life. Yes, people in prison need attorneys and job training. But they also need Jesus. Yes, poor kids need sports programs and after school tutoring, but they also need Jesus. Yes, people in Africa need clean water and medicine for AIDS. But they also need Jesus.

Without some overriding purpose in life, without a greater meaning than simply getting my stomach filled with food, people shrivel up and die because we human beings are more than bodies. As the book of Ecclesiastes says:

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God has set eternity in the hearts of men.

The reason we are building this community center and we are engaging in a giving campaign for world missions is that we are tired of choosing which of the two great commandments we in this church are going to obey. Here in the Vineyard we say: Why not both? Why not love God and love our neighbor. Why not serve God and serve our community? We believe in this church that people need both jobs and Jesus. We say people need both food and faith. We are saying in this campaign that we reject the false options presented by the conservative church on the one hand and the liberal church on the other. Through this campaign, Vineyard is going on record as committing to do the entire will of God.

So, Jesus says: Do this then. There Jesus goes again. Put it into practice. But we read in verse 29,

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Lk 10:29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

How we lawyers love to discuss, debate, dissect the logic. So long as we can keep a debate going, we don't actually have to confront our own shortcomings.

- Jesus, can't you be content with us being able to articulate our position on giving? Must we also empty our bank accounts?

- Jesus, can't we have a Bible study about the poor? Must we actually get our hands dirty and do something on behalf of the poor. Can't we have a nice discussion in the family room of our suburban home?
- Jesus, do we really have to go to some miserable spot on the globe, if God tells us to go? Can't we just read missions biographies and send in a check?

Friend, we love keeping the arguments up because if we keep arguing then we do not have to deal with the real issue, which is will we choose to actually obey God in our practices? Will we ask forgiveness from someone we've offended when God tells us to? Will we stop doing what we are doing with our boyfriend, because God has spoken? Will we commit to our marriages and not become another statistic? Will we deal with the essential issue in our life that we are bitter? We are lazy? We are selfish?

If I can make something really complicated, the lawyer says, I don't need to deal with the plain word of God. What after all is marriage? What is sex? Who is my neighbor?

In rabbinic writings that were written between the time that the Old Testament writings were finished in about 400 BC and the New Testament writings began somewhere in the late 40's AD, we read passages like this in a book called Ben Sirach. Here is what it reads.

If you do a good turn, know for whom you are doing it, and your good deeds will not go to waste. Do good to a devout man, and you will receive a reward, if not from him, then certainly from the Most High...give to a devout man, *do not go to the help of a sinner*, do good to a humble man, *give nothing to a godless one*. Refuse him bread, do not give him any, it might make him stronger than you are; then you would be repaid evil twice over for all the good you have done him. For the Most High himself detests sinners, and will repay the wicked with vengeance. Give to the good man, and *do not go to the help of a sinner*.

Who is my neighbor, the lawyer asks? What is the limit of my obligation to people? Does my neighbor include a stranger who is pushing their broken down car in the snow? Does my neighbor include some homeless guy with a sign asking for food? Is the Somali woman, who is having trouble navigating her way through an American grocery store, or at the admissions office at school, my neighbor?

So Jesus tells this story in verse 30.

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Lk 10:30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

The 17-mile desert road from Jerusalem to Jericho has been dangerous all through history. Robbers attacked crusaders in the middle ages. Travelers in the 19th century had to travel with armed escorts. And in Jesus' day, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was filled with robbers.

According to Ken Bailey, who is an expert in Middle Eastern culture, it was common in Jesus' day to classify people socially by their dialect and dress. Bailey says that in ancient Palestine there was an amazing number of languages and dialects. Hebrew alone had classical Hebrew, late biblical Hebrew, and Mishnaic Hebrew. But there were also settled communities in Palestine that spoke Aramaic, Greek, Samaritan, Arabic, Nabataean, and Latin.

And depending on one's wealth and the community, people would dress differently from one another. Typically, if a person met a stranger on a road, they could tell from a distance, simply by looking at the stranger's clothing where the stranger fit in on the social pecking order. If their clothes didn't give them away, their accent and dialogue always did.

So, who is this man who is lying on the road, beaten by robbers? Where does he fit into the scheme of things?

There is no way to know. He was just a man who was stripped of his clothes. He was unconscious, so he was unable to speak. We can't tell his language or his dialect. It is impossible to tell his religion or ethnicity, or social status. He is just a human being in need.

And the question Jesus is going to pose to us is: Does God require anything of you simply toward a fellow human being?

Now, Jesus tells us about two men, who felt no obligation to their fellow human being. Luke 10:31-32,

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Lk 10:31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.

Lk 10:32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

Why did the priest and Levite avoid this man? I don't think it had anything to do with ritual defilement, according to the laws of Leviticus. These men were coming from the temple, not going to it. I don't think they were concerned about whether or not they could still make offerings. Why did the priest and Levite avoid this man?

Well, perhaps, they were afraid? Who knows if this man lying in the road is just a setup? Maybe this guy is a plant. If I go to his aid, perhaps there are some robbers laying in wait.

Our concern for our personal safety, our fear of putting ourselves on the line is often an issue regarding how we are going to define who the neighbor is that we owe a duty. We might think to ourselves:

- If I go overseas on a missions trip, I might catch something. I had a friend pick up some bug that she drank in Asia and she was sick for weeks.
- I've heard Americans are terribly unpopular in that part of the world. Why would I want to go to a place where they hate Americans?

Safety, security – that's what we Americans argue.

- If I stop to help this person push their car, they could have a partner waiting to rob me. This is a bad neighborhood. I better drive by.

Safety and security are primary concerns for Americans, especially middle class Americans.

- If I really give sacrificially to this campaign, I'm not sure I'll have enough in my retirement account when I'm ready to retire.
- What about providing for myself? If I don't look out for #1, who will look out for #1?

Now, friends, I think personal safety and security are very legitimate concerns. I would not want my wife getting out of her car in a tough neighborhood to help someone out. There are places that I would be afraid to get out, and situations I would be afraid to intervene in. But I have to ask myself a question, and I think this story poses a question to us: How far can you go with safety and security and still continue to follow Jesus Christ? How big a zone of protection and safety do you or your family need? As big a zone as middle class Americans demand? As much as financial advisors tell you? As much as house alarm salesmen suggest? When is my concern, or your concern, for our safety and the security of our family is enough?

Of course we always say: Well, it is not me I'm concerned about, it is my family. When does our concern for safety and security simply become another name for our utter lack of trust in God?

I can't answer the question of safety and security for you. Or how many personal investments you need. But let me share something from the early church, because it is a stunning rebuke to my middle class, American insistence on no-risk safety.

Rodney Stark, in a fascinating study of the growth of the Christian church in the first four centuries following Christ, wrote a book titled *The Rise of Christianity*. In his book, he writes about a devastating plague that roared through the Roman

Empire in the year 260 AD. Stark quotes the Christian leader, Dionysius. Dionysius wrote a lengthy tribute to the heroic nursing efforts of local Christians, many of whom lost their lives caring for others. Listen to this:

Like most of our brother Christians showed unbound love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need, and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life supremely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbor, and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and caring for others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead...the best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of Presbyters, deacons, and laymen, winning high commendations so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.

Now, Dionysius, having noted how the Christian community nursed the sick, added these words:

The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the very onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the road before they were dead, and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread of the contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.

Other writers confirmed Dionysius' historical account. Christians drew near to people who were sick. Pagans ran away.

Our middle class American wisdom tells us to protect ourselves. Get away from sick people. Get away from sick people. That is not how our forefathers acted. Non-Christian doctors during the plague fled the cities. Non-Christians raced for the hills in order to preserve their lives.

But do you know something? Paganism ended up dying out in the Roman Empire and Christianity triumphed because people had a value higher than their own security and safety. They believed they were called to love their neighbor.

So I ask you: How much does your concern for your own security, your own physical security, your own economic security, the economic security of your family cause you to limit who you will call your neighbor?

Why did the priest and Levite avoid this man? The religious people in Jesus' day had developed systems of thinking that allowed them to rationalize away their neglect. I read the passage from Ben Sirach just a few minutes ago. Essentially, religious people said that Ben Sirach was saying if I help another person who is a stranger, I may be helping a sinner. I may be strengthening someone who hates

God. Unless I absolutely know for certain that the person who gets my help will be responsible and not go out and sin, it would be wrong for me to help them.

Do you know that we also in the 21st century have elaborate systems of thought that keep us from doing or even noticing clear commands from the scripture. Of course, if you don't want to do something, even small rationalizations will keep you from doing what you don't want to do. But elaborate religious and political systems sometimes utterly blind us to the huge issues in the scripture.

Let me give you one illustration. And I use this only because it is so contemporary. There are several thousand verses in the Bible about our duty to the poor. In terms of emphasis, the sin of neglecting the poor is second only to the sin of idolatry in the Old Testament. Yet, if you asked evangelical Christians before the last election: What is the most pressing moral issue facing America, we mostly would have answered "gay marriage." This despite the fact that 1 billion people on our planet live on less than \$1 a day. This despite the fact that 20,000 children die every day due to hunger and disease from utterly preventable causes like lack of clean drinking water.

Now, listen to me. I am completely convinced biblically that marriage may only be covenanted between a man and woman. I believe this is rooted in our creation by God. I believe this ought to be supported in our laws and by our courts. But, let's be honest for a moment and say that there is infinitely more spoken about the sin of the neglect of the poor in the Bible than there is about the sin of homosexuality. I'm not saying, therefore, that same sex marriage is okay. All I'm talking about is emphasis. I'm talking about proportionality.

How did we Christians ever allow the creation of a system of thought that permits us to narrow our ethical duties to two things: abortion and gay marriage?

Our community center is a giant protest where we in the Vineyard shout "no" to the prevailing political voices. We will not blind ourselves to the whole counsel of the Word of God, or let ourselves off the hook through compliance to one or two biblical requirements. This community center is about us complying with the whole counsel of God.

Eric Rosenberg is an attorney in our congregation. He has been involved in our prison and homeless ministry for more than three. He goes to Marion juvenile prison twice a month and ministers to youth offenders. In addition, Eric goes out on the streets ministering to the homeless through Fruit of the Vine two or three times a month. He does free legal work for our homeless friends to assist them in getting their lives together off the streets. He is married to his wife, Susan, and has been a member of the church for the last three years.

VIDEO – Eric Rosenberg

There are several things we discover concerning the Samaritan. One thing we discover is that compassion begins with a choice to see. The text has a clear progression of nearness. Verse 31,

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Lk 10:31 A priest happened to be going down the same road...

In verse 32, we read:

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Lk 10:32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place...

In verse 33, we read:

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Lk 10:33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was;

There is a progress of drawing near and not averting your eyes. The priest and the Levite see, but they don't want to see. They see, but they turn away. Compassion begins with the eyes.

The movie Hotel Rwanda that is getting so much press now raises a really disturbing question about America and the rest of the West. Why do we pretend that we don't see what is happening in Africa or Asia? Why do we pretend that we don't see what is happening in inner-city schools or in prisons? So many debates about the so-called poor in our country demonstrate that the debaters have never really been around poor people. Why are there these argument about whether the poor are that way because they brought it on themselves through irresponsibility, or that they are poor because of unjust structures in our society?

The fact is that most debaters and arguers have never been around the poor. They don't know anyone who is poor. Contemporary America is different than almost any society that's ever been. We don't have normal interaction outside of our social class. Our communities are segregated by income. Our workplaces are generally segregated by vocation and status.

One great reason that we are building the community center is so that we in the middle class can become friends with people who we normally wouldn't be friends with; so that we can get near to someone like the Samaritan and not turn away. The community center is an opportunity to expand the category of people we would include in the word "neighbor." And so is what we are trying to do in world missions. We are trying to expand who we call "neighbor."

But to be a neighbor involves a choice to take a risk. The Samaritan is no less a target for robbers than the priest or the Levite. He could have thought, as they

did, about his own safety and security. This is a dangerous area and I just ought to move on by. He could have rationalized away his neglect saying: This man in the road is likely a Jew. If his own people wouldn't help him out, then why should I? Why should I get involved? Besides, if I help I could get myself in trouble with his family or the Jewish authorities who probably hate Samaritans.

But he doesn't let rationalizations keep him from drawing near. And he doesn't let his concern for his own safety keep him from drawing near. Instead, he binds up the man's wounds, transports him to an inn, which was dangerous. Ken Bailey points out it is like a Native American dragging a scalped white cowboy into Dodge City in 1875. The townspeople almost certainly would have said: How do we know you didn't do this?

But he takes care of this stranger all night and offers to pay the bill in a totally open-ended way. Talk about sacrificing your own self interest and putting yourself and your family's finances at risk! The founder of the Vineyard movement, John Wimber, used to say: Faith is spelled R-I-S-K, that you really aren't exercising faith until you take a risk, until you push past the zone of what is safe and reasonable and self-protective.

This giving campaign is all about God's invitation to this church and to each one of us personally to put ourselves at risk. If we are talking about world missions, will you leave the confines of the US for a period of time? Will you spend your vacation time, if it is a short-term trip and spend money? Will you take a risk and go overseas? Will you take a risk of listening to the voice of God that might be calling you on a longer-term basis to leave America.

Let me be frank with you and say that this giving campaign will only be successful if you personally join with me and my wife in taking a huge financial risk by committing to giving extravagantly. We don't talk about money a lot in this church. I've never wanted to be in a church where week in and week out the main subject is money and giving. But I feel really comfortable speaking about giving in this case because the money we are raising is not going primarily for this church's own needs. The money that we are giving is going out to our city and to the world.

There are two ways to think about giving. There is the no-risk way. Take your income, subtract your expenses including things that you plan on spending over the next three years, and give the excess. In other words, no risk. Figure up what you can afford and give that.

The second way involves risk like the Samaritan. You honestly go before God and say: God, what do you want me to give and then you obey. And that is what Marlene and I are currently doing. God, what do you want us to commit to over the next three years? That is scary. I know a number that I have in mind. I'm afraid that God may be saying: That's not nearly enough. I want you to be more

vulnerable, more at risk. That is the process we're having to go through as a family. But this campaign is all about risk. And in taking this risk as a church, to build a community center and to expand our involvement in world missions, we are simply choosing to be a good follower of Jesus Christ.

Listen, the early church uniformly saw in the person of the good Samaritan, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Savior Jesus Christ left his comfortable, secure existence in heaven, came down and put himself at risk. He made himself vulnerable first by being born to a poor family in Galilee; and then step by step in obedience to God the Father, he made himself vulnerable to people in this world. Like the Samaritan he found us bruised and broken and he rescued us. Like the Samaritan, he bound up our wounds, he healed up. He nursed us back to health and held nothing back. He gave his all, including his own life, in order that we might find life.

Taking risk is what the Christian life is all about. Today I want to invite you to step out of your zone of safety and security and participate with me and the other leaders in this church in this great new adventure that God is calling us to. Let's pray.

A Church That Takes Risks

Rich Nathan

February 5-6, 2005

Blessed to be a Blessing Series

Luke 10:25-37

I. People Who Love To Argue (Lk. 10:25-29)

A. Two Types Of Debaters (Lk. 10:25,26)

B. Two Great Commandments (Lk. 10:27,28)

II. People Who Will Not Get Involved (Lk. 10:30-32)

A. The Problem Of Fear

B. The Problem Of Rationalization

III. People Who Risk (Lk. 10:33-37)

A. A Choice To See

B. A Choice To Risk

C. A Choice To Follow