

Sermon—October 10-11, 1998  
Responding to God's Extravagant Grace  
Matthew 16:13-32

Rich Nathan

## A Church that Nothing Can Stop

By now, most of you have been informed that we are in the middle of a building campaign. The Vineyard is planning to add on to our current structure about 78,000 square feet. We are adding a new auditorium onto the back of the building – a 3000 person auditorium. We are going to be adding a new children's ministry wing. We are going to build a new bookstore. Plans are in the works for a family lending library for families and kids that would include some good children's videos as well as books for children and adults. We are planning to increase the accessibility of the building to those with various disabilities. And in order to do this we are engaging in a giving campaign.

On November 1, as I have mentioned several times from the pulpit, we are going to cancel our five weekend services – Saturday night, our three Sunday morning services, and our Joshua House service. We are going to pull the entire church down to the Columbus Convention Center where the service will start at 10:00 a.m. We will worship together. I will be preaching. We will see a video regarding some of the neat things that God has done in the church. It is going to be a great celebration. We will have a full children's program there up through grade four.

At that service, you will be asked to make a 3-year pledge to our building campaign over and above your normal tithe. And so I have asked you over this past

month, if you are part of this church, to spend some time with the Lord and listen to him regarding the nature of your gift. Leaders here in the church are going to make their commitments ahead of time on October 23 at a Leadership Dessert in accordance with the scriptural pattern of leaders going first in giving. But then the whole church will go ahead and make its commitment on November 1.

When I began to describe to you the giving campaign, I said that you could expect certain things to occur in this church during the campaign, during the months of September and October. I said that we could expect that some people would be hassled by Satan. I have heard reports from a number of people who said, “My goodness, the warfare just seems to be increased. I have had increased difficulty.”

I also said that we could expect to hear about some miracles. Didn’t I say that? I said that we are going to hear some miracle stories. It seemed fairly obvious to me that we were going to hear about some extraordinary things, some real breakthroughs in light of the fact that we had some 560 people commit to fast for a total of 4483 days. We also had hundreds and hundreds of people gathering together over this weekend from Friday night to Saturday evening in a 24-hour prayer vigil praying about individual and church needs. In light of the numerous people who are praying and fasting, it just seemed obvious to me that God was going to do something of a miraculous nature.

Here is a testimony that I received last week that occurred during this giving campaign. Listen to this.

“I am writing this letter to share with you my family’s testimony to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have been blessed with three beautiful sons—one 7, one

3 and one 2. In March of 1995, the Lord sent us Sean (our middle son). He was by all appearances a healthy 8.5 lb. boy. In April 1995, Sean had to have surgery for bilateral inguinal hernias. Again in May 1995, he had the same surgery for two new inguinal hernias, and was diagnosed with gastro-esophageal reflux. During the year that followed, Sean was admitted to the hospital 14 times and had countless more visits to the emergency room. He would spend most of his days crying in pain from the reflux and at night when he was sleeping, my wife and I frequently commented to each other that his appearance was that of a dead person.

Whenever Sean was sick with anything, even a cold, during this time he would be so wiped out and lethargic that he would always wind up in the hospital for rehydration. In December of 1995, during one of these visits, one of the doctors accidentally ordered Sean's blood sugar level to be checked. It was dangerously low at 32. This finally confirmed to them what we knew and had been telling them all along, that something was terribly wrong with our son.

After two months of numerous tests, the doctors concluded that Sean had a Fatty Acid Oxidation Disorder. In other words, his body was unable to produce an enzyme necessary to metabolize fat for energy. Now the question was which enzyme was missing? In the mean time, Sean was getting sicker and sicker. We were unable to keep any food in him.

Finally, in May 1996 his reflux was surgically repaired and a feeding tube was placed in his stomach. We had also learned to recognize when he was having a metabolic crisis, each of which had the potential to leave him severely handicapped

or dead. Since that time, Sean became increasingly unstable. An average day with Sean included tube feedings, aerosols, numerous medications, and frequently an I.V.

Sean told us one evening that he had visited God's house and God wasn't home because two people died and He had to go get them and bring them to His house. God told Sean that the next time Sean came, He would be in the window and say, 'Come on in, Sean.'

At that, our 7-year old son said, 'I've been to God's house too. It's the church.'

Sean replied, 'No, it's heaven. I was there.'

The doctors told us to take him home and enjoy every minute with him because everyone else with this disease had died by the age of two. We felt like God was preparing us and Sean for what the doctors had said was inevitable—Sean's premature death.

Sean has had literally hundreds of metabolic attacks. We have spent a lot of time praying and thanking God for preparing Sean for his death, and asking Him to give us the strength to get through it. When our friends at Vineyard heard that Sean was unstable and in the hospital last week, they surrounded us with prayers, meals and support. My wife and I also chose to fast and pray for healing for Sean (disease and pain-free on earth or home in heaven).

Last week God began showing us signs that Sean was getting better. We knew in our hearts that Sean was at least partially healed. We were thankful beyond belief. A few days ago his leading metabolic doctor called us and said that he had lab results that he couldn't explain. The test that had confirmed the diagnosis of VLCAD (his fatal metabolic disease), had been repeated by researchers and showed NO

SIGN OF THE DISEASE. We immediately knew that God had performed a miracle and Sean was completely healed.

We stopped Sean's tube feedings (which up to that point he hadn't been able to survive more than 2½ hours without). That was Thursday morning (two days ago), and now he is healthy, happy and shows no signs of the disease. We knew God could perform miracles, but we never imagined we would be blessed enough to live one."

Isn't that a great story? Now let me share with you another story. I said not only would we hear testimonies of healings, but I also said we would hear about some financial breakthroughs. That as people commit themselves to give and they are praying about their finances, God is going to grant some financial breakthroughs. Please, by the way, please take some time to write out a testimony. We are putting these together in a booklet that we would like to give out at that November 1 service. So please do that, OK? Even if it is only a paragraph or two of gratitude for the growth in your family or for being taught or for your small group – whatever it is, if God has ministered to you in some way in the Vineyard, take a few minutes to write a note of testimony and thankfulness to the Lord.

But I told you that we would also see some financial breakthroughs. Listen to this story.

"Dear Rich, I am a college student at OSU. Through prayer and fasting for 3 days, God led me to go to school and VLI full-time and not to work. I quit my job with the faith that God would provide. I had only loans that covered my tuition. I did not have money for food, rent, utilities or my car. Two weeks into school I still didn't have money for my needs, but God did. I had been agonizing that I couldn't

participate in the giving campaign. God had given me a number, which was 1/3 of my rent. I couldn't come up with rent, let alone another third.

I had been turned down for a Pell grant three times. I prayed and God led me to reapply. Thursday, October 1<sup>st</sup> I applied again. The financial aid office said it would take 7 weeks to process and I probably would not receive a grant because I'd been turned down this year already—they actually said that I'd be denied.

I prayed frantically for the next 1½ hours while they looked my application over to make sure I had everything. The woman, before she left, looked at me and said, "Don't get your hopes up, hon, the government is cutting everywhere, especially in education." 1½ hours later she came out to notify me of a decision that should have taken 7 weeks, but which knocked me over. She said I had been approved for a full grant. God had provided again. He called me to give more than I even had and then he also provided a way to obey him. God is sovereign. He's in control."

So if you have a testimony of God's faithfulness, if you have seen a financial breakthrough or a breakthrough in some other area, write it down and get it in, OK? These are encouragements.

We are going to do something that is really a bold and risky thing. We are building a building that will house people who are not here yet. Any time you build, you are taking a step of faith that your best days are ahead of you. We are saying by building that we don't believe we have reached the high water mark of the church. That while the ride so far has been wonderful, we anticipate an even brighter future.

Some might say, "But Rich, the signs in the economy are not bright. Consumer confidence is beginning to slip. There seems to be some storm clouds gathering on

the horizon with the international monetary problems and growing problems on the national front. The stock market has been going down. We may be facing a long, drawn out impeachment process, which is never good for the country. There are many serious issues facing America right now. There are moral issues, spiritual issues – what gives you the confidence, Rich, to launch out and lead out in building a brand new building? What gives you the confidence?”

In the text that we are going to look at today, Jesus himself gives us the confidence. That no matter what is on the horizon, no matter what the opposition is, no matter how fierce the war is, “Nothing Can Stop the Church.”

We are going to look at Matthew 16:13, where we read,

“When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ ‘But what about you,’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’”

A church that nothing can stop is a church which allows Jesus the freedom to define who he is to the church. A church that nothing can stop does not insist on imposing upon Jesus our own definition of who we will allow him to be. But we let Jesus fill in the claims.

Jesus asks in v. 13, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

It is interesting that Jesus’ most common way of identifying himself was the phrase, “Son of Man”. It is used 84 times in the gospels. In every instance but two, Jesus himself uses it. In those two instances, people are quoting Jesus. Jesus

deliberately chose “Son of Man” because it is an ambiguous phrase. It requires people to explore, to seek. On the one hand, the Son of Man could have been speaking about the heavenly Son of Man, this glorious figure that we read about in the book of Daniel who has great authority and is worshipped and who sets up an everlasting kingdom, who is sent by God to come at the end of the age. For those of you who are taking notes, you may want to refer to Daniel 7:13-14.

But we also see that another facet of Son of Man in the OT is just an ordinary man, one who is a servant of God.

Now, Jesus, deliberately I believe, chooses this ambiguous phrase because he is going to let his works, his life, his words define who exactly he is to the church. Jesus is basically taking a white canvas and saying, “Let me paint for you the kind of Messiah I am going to be.”

So Jesus asks the question, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” I have been painting on the canvas for quite a while. They have heard me speak and seen some of the miracles. They have watched me at work. What are they saying?

We read in v. 14, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah...” John the Baptist in the NT and Elijah in the OT were to be forerunners of the Messiah. Herod, who had John the Baptist beheaded, feared John so much that he was afraid he had come back to life. At least Herod believed that Jesus was John the Baptist. “Others said Elijah. Still others Jeremiah.”

You say, “Why Jeremiah?”

There was a Jewish book called Second Macabees that has a story about how the prophet Jeremiah hid the Ark of the Covenant and the Altar of Incense in a cave on



the occasion of the first temple's destruction. In 586 BC the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. And when the temple was destroyed the Ark of the Covenant was lost, along with many of the other items from the temple and the Holy Place in the temple. Well, the book of Second Macabees said that the prophet Jeremiah actually snuck these items out of the temple and hid them in a cave in the Judean hills. There was a belief in Judaism that still exists today in some orthodox sects that these items, the Ark of the Covenant and some of the temple items, would be recovered and put back into a rebuilt temple before Messiah came. So some people said that Jesus was Jeremiah, one of the prophets.

Now, let's listen to what the people are saying. They are saying the common people are all incredibly respectful of Jesus. They are saying, "You are one of the greatest, if not the greatest person who ever lived. You are certainly a very great man, a very important, a very in touch with God person. You may be the highest reaching human hand stretching out across the gulf toward God of anyone who ever lived. Your hand, Jesus, may reach further across the gulf toward the Father than of anyone who ever lived."

But you know, for Jesus it's not enough that we recognize him as the highest reaching human hand reaching out for the hand of God. The issue is which side of the gulf between man and God does Jesus stand on? Is Jesus the hand of man reaching out toward God or does Jesus stand on the other side of the gulf with God reaching out his hand toward man? Is Jesus our hand, even our best hand, reaching up or is Jesus God's hand reaching down?

One German pastor who pastored during the Nazi era in Germany and himself was very nearly executed on orders of the Gestapo, a pastor by the name of Helmut Thielicke, said, "Where you place Jesus, on which side of the gulf, on man's side or on God's side, is the point on which you stand or fall." It is the ultimate dividing line. Is Jesus that one we are to give prizes to? Jesus, you deserve the Nobel Peace Prize. You deserve the Congressional Medal of Honor. You are a hero, one of many, but certainly important.

Or is Jesus something else entirely? Totally unique, a different order of being. Not just the highest creature, but the creator. Is he a spokesperson for God or is he God speaking to us?

Jesus does not allow the question of his identity to remain an abstract, philosophical item of discussion for any of us. The question moves from the poll taking realm – what are the polls saying about who I am; how do people in general view me – to the more personal v. 15, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?"

Jesus gets very personal with us, intensely personal. It is not enough for you to say, "Well, my family says, my mother said, my father said, my grandparents said..."

"Well, Jesus you must understand I was raised as a Jew so my cultural heritage says, my religious upbringing taught me..."

"The church I went to..."

"Of course, I was raised as a Catholic or a Baptist..."

Jesus never asks us, "Tell me what your family thinks of me." The ultimate question is not what does your religious upbringing suggest regarding who I am?

What did your philosophy professor say? What do your friends and those in your social circle say?

Jesus always asks the more personal, probing question, “Who do you say I am?”

There is no salvation by way of heritage. It doesn't matter what your family background was. What everyone around you says. What do you say? Have you personally received the gift of salvation offered to us in Jesus Christ? Have you invited Christ to take control of your life? There is a personal decision to be made. There is a line that must be crossed by each individual.

I often compare salvation to marriage. It doesn't matter that your parents are married. It doesn't automatically make you married. You need to make a decision. It is the same thing regarding the gift of salvation. You either extend your open hands to Jesus and say, “Jesus, grant me the gift of salvation. Come and rule over my life. I make a decision to receive you.” Or you remain unsaved. You choose to cross the line.

Jesus in one of his parables said, “Enter by the narrow gate.” The kingdom of heaven is entered through a very narrow gate. It is a gate that only admits one person at a time. Just because you have gone through doesn't mean your children have gone through. Just because your wife went through doesn't mean you went through. Just because your parents went through...or your church went through doesn't mean you have gone through it. Every person must enter the narrow gate by way of his or her own decision.

“What about you, he asked. Who do you say I am?”

This is not only a personal question. This is also a highly confrontational question. Very often with someone who has not stepped over the line, someone who has not yet gone through the narrow gate, someone who has not yet surrendered to Jesus as Lord of their life, very often such a person tries to avoid the personal “you” by raising all kinds of spiritual flak.

“Well, surely you couldn’t expect me to embrace Jesus as the universal Lord and unique Savior, the one of a kind being. You couldn’t expect me to embrace that. What about the Australian Aborigine who never heard?”

“What about the Native Americans before Christians came over to this continent?”

“What about this person or that person?”

Surely, we must trust the world to the justice and mercy of our gracious and heavenly Father, but I have noticed something about Jesus in the gospels. He almost never answers abstract questions. What about this person? What about that person? He is quite confrontational: What about you? You who have heard the way of salvation. You who have heard that Jesus died on a cross and was nailed to a cross – had iron spikes driven through his feet and hands and hung there as a sacrifice to pay for your sins. What about you? Have you ever knelt at the cross and said, “Jesus, forgive me for all my sins against God? Have mercy on me, a sinner. I open my hands and I receive the free gift of salvation. I open my heart to receive you into my life. Be my Lord. Be my Savior.”

What about you? You have heard.

Now, what does the Bible say regarding who Jesus is? We read Peter's confession in v. 16, "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'"

The Christ is a Greek word that translates the Hebrew word "Messiah" or "Mashiach". It means literally "anointed one." There were three offices in the OT in which a person would be anointed with oil, would have oil, probably olive oil, and in some cases a special blend of oil and spices poured over their heads before they were appointed to an office in the Old Testament. There were three offices: prophets were anointed with oil; priests were anointed with oil; and kings were anointed with oil.

Now Jesus combines in his person the three great Old Testament offices. He is our chief prophet, the final revealer of God. He is our great high priest. The one who goes before God as both sacrifice and priest, pleading our case with the Father and our eternal king. Our Jesus is the Christ—the true anointed one who combines in his person the office of prophet, priest and king. And who is anointed not with oil, but with the Holy Spirit of God. He is not only the Christ, but Jesus is the Son of the Living God. We become sons and daughters of God by way of adoption when we are born into God's family by faith in his unique Son, Jesus, who has a unique, special relationship with the Father. Jesus is the heavenly, eternal Son who is equal to God the Father in all respects.

We are pressing now on the mystery of the Trinity—God the Father; God the Son; and God the Holy Spirit.

Let me sum up this first major section of my teaching. Jesus asked who do the people say he is. He asked who do you say he is. But you know, the church that nothing can stop is a church that allows Jesus to define for us who he is in reality without trying to squeeze him into some preconceived box. The church that nothing can stop is a church that doesn't try to make Jesus over into our image, an image that we are comfortable with.

I remember as a Jew receiving Jesus into my life and believing that he was the Jewish Messiah, not just someone for Gentiles. I remember going to a church when I was 18 and I saw this painting on the wall of this fair-skinned, blond haired, blue-eyed man. I said to someone I was with: Who is that guy on the wall? They looked at me like I had two heads. Who is that guy? That guy is Jesus. I said: That Scandinavian guy is Jesus? He was a Jew from Israel. He would look like a modern day Arab.

But I don't mean not just remaking Jesus in terms of his physical appearance. When I say that most people remake Jesus in their own image, what I mean is that most people, most churches, remake Jesus in a way that makes them feel comfortable, a Jesus who doesn't challenge, a Jesus who doesn't confront. A Jesus who doesn't make us squirm. A Jesus who doesn't make us constantly call into question: what is the nature of our relationship with God? How real is our spirituality?

The Jesus of the Bible is so totally unlike the domesticated therapist who says: I am here just to make you feel comfortable and to build your self-esteem. He is so much unlike the free market capitalist who says: go ahead, consume as much as you

can. Fill your house with as much stuff as you can afford. Spend your life and resources on gaining more material for yourself. It's OK if you are a little racist. It's OK if you fool around a little sexually, after all, everyone does and lies about it.

Friends, a church that nothing can stop is a church that has an uncomfortable Jesus. An exasperating Jesus. An unsettling Jesus. A Jesus that challenges our culture. A Jesus that we can't completely figure out. A Jesus that we don't dominate. A Jesus that we don't domesticate. A Jesus who scares us. A Jesus who calls us to major risk. A Jesus who might say: Empty your bank account. Give up some financial security. Give way above what is reasonable for a building campaign. Like that girl we read about: commit what you don't yet have and I will provide for you.

A church that nothing can stop is a church that is confident about its potential. Vv. 17-20, "Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you Simon, Son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.'"

A church that nothing can stop is a church that is confident about its potential. We read in v. 17 about the great revelation that came to Simon Peter. Peter is always the spokesman for the 12 disciples. And Jesus said the revelation regarding who Christ is did not come to Peter by man. In other words, Peter didn't understand who Jesus is by virtue or some human process, by discovery, by experimentation, by intuition, by insight, by exploration, by tradition. We don't get to know who Jesus is by digging around and trying to figure out, stretching our intellects as far as we possibly can.

Seeing who Jesus is requires a divinely given revelation to our minds. There is a miracle that occurs. We hear about Jesus. We read about him. We check it out. We listen to preaching and messages. We have friends who talk with us about Jesus. But you never recognize who Jesus really is unless a miracle occurs. The Bible says that apart from a miracle from God, people are spiritually blind. A miracle must occur to open our eyes. The Bible says that people are spiritually dead. I always picture us being born with dead radio receivers. We turn it on and say: I am not aware of God even though the radio signal is being sent. I am not in touch with it. Until the radio receiver in your spirit is healed by virtue of a miracle, you aren't going to be in touch with who Jesus is.

I remember feeling like the lights of the universe went on. Before I opened myself up to Jesus, the universe was covered in darkness. I was not in touch with God. I was not aware that there was a presence, a life. When I opened myself up to Jesus suddenly the universe lit up. It was like sitting in a dark theater for me, completely silent and dark, and suddenly the orchestra comes up out of the pit and begins to play. The lights go on and the play begins. That's what it felt like. Suddenly the universe was alive and I was in touch with God. That's what happened to Peter. Jesus said, "this didn't happen by virtue of an insight of man, but by a revelation from God."

Now I would say that this revelation of who Jesus is to you is not a one-time revelation. There is an initial clearing of our eyes. There is an initial lights going on – Oh, my goodness, you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. You are the Savior.



But as you relate to Jesus, there are also the ongoing miracles of revelation where you gain fresh insight regarding who Christ is in this moment.

Jesus you are not only the Savior from the guilt of my sins on the Day of Judgment. But Jesus I have a fresh discovery of you as the Savior of me from my addictions. I didn't realize that you could also heal me of this bad habit. How many times do you discover something new in Jesus? And it's this revelation from God about who Jesus is that propels us forward as individuals and as a church. I never saw you Jesus in quite that way as one who wants to physically heal, or as someone who could actually keep me from drowning in a time of great trial. I always feared that I would sink like a stone. But I just went through this crisis and I discovered Jesus as someone who would keep me going. Christian growth is all wrapped up in gaining insights from our Father in heaven concerning who his son really is. He is the one who flings people out in world missions, the one who has a heart for the entire world, the one who cares desperately about the poor, and the one who loves children.

Now, I am not going to spend a great amount of time on this phrase in v. 18, "I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church." A huge controversy exists between Catholics and Protestants regarding exactly what Jesus was saying by "On this rock I will build my church." There is a word play going on, a pun, that does not at all come out in English, but does come out in Greek. It is "you are Petros" – you are Peter. "And on this petra [on this rock] I will build my church." Roman Catholics have used this verse to support the notion that Peter had unique authority in the early church – that the church was built on Peter. They go on then and say he

was the first Bishop of Rome and that the Bishop of Rome has supreme authority over the church by virtue of this grant of authority. This has been used, then, to support the notion of the Roman Catholic papacy.

Protestants, in reaction, have come up with a variety of interpretations saying, “no, Jesus is not saying I am building the church on Peter, the rock but Jesus is pointing to himself and saying, On this rock, me, Jesus the rock, I am going to build my church, or I am going to build my church on your confession of faith.”

I think it is clear from the passage that he is speaking personally to Peter. That there is a word play on Peter’s name – you are Petros and on this petra – it even comes out more plainly in the Aramaic – you are Cephas and on this cepha I will build my church. But we could say that Peter was given some unique authority in the early church without going overboard with the whole establishment of the papacy and the apostolic succession.

All of these issues are completely extraneous to what I think that we see here and that is three great affirmations that a church that nothing can stop needs to believe and practice. He says, “On this rock I will build my church.” The moment that Peter makes an individual confession of faith, and I said before every one of us has to make our own confession; the gate is narrow. We don’t come in with a crowd. We come in one at a time through the narrow gate. After Peter makes his individual confession, it is interesting that Jesus immediately speaks to him about church because according to the Bible, Christianity is more than an individual decision. People who turn to Jesus are immediately tied into a body of believers. There is no such thing in the New Testament as a Christian without a church. We think in such

individualistic notions in America, but biblically there is no such thing as a Christian who is unattached to a church. It's like I want to play offensive tackle, but I don't want to be on a football team. I just like playing offensive tackle. Or I want to be an Army Sergeant; I just don't want to be in the Army. Or I love synchronized swimming, but I want to do it by myself. I love playing lead guitar, but I don't want to be in a band. It's unthinkable; it's a contradiction to be a Christian without being connected to a church.

Friends, we cannot function independently. We need each other. Listen to this testimony:

"Hi, Rich. Thank you for being faithful to our Lord and teaching me. I am so in love with Jesus and this church. I have been coming to the Vineyard for 3-4 years and Jesus has truly changed me. So many times I have wanted to write and thank you. Forgive me. I used to feel shy, introverted and like I didn't fit in with the body of Christ or anywhere else in the world. But Jesus has changed me. I feel like I belong here. 20 years ago I was saved, but I never really had a personal relationship with Jesus because I was poor and had few clothes. My family would drive to the church parking lot and we would see all these people dressed up and we would feel bad and keep on driving right through the parking lot and back home. I would feel like crying. I truly want to say thank you and this church for loving me as I was. I love all of you and have made many wonderful friends. I am involved in ministry now and I get to give to others and help them and that is one thing I could never do until Jesus changed me. As I look at my life right now, I am overwhelmed with all that God has done for me. It brings me to tears."

And then she goes on to talk about how she was healed here of severe migraines since the time when she received prayer several months ago. She hasn't had any. And she essentially says that her life has changed because she got connected to Jesus and a church body.

That's why I continually urge you to get connected to a small group that we call kinships here. Those are coed. We have women's groups and men's groups. We have new believers groups. We have Bible studies. But you can't really relate to this church unless you get into a small group. I want to encourage you to go out in the hallway after the service and pick up a card. Look at the boards in our main lobby and grab a few cards. Stop making excuses. If your husband won't go, say "fine, stay at home and watch TV. I am going to get into a kinship or women's group." If your wife won't go, say "Fine, you don't have to go. You can stay home and read a book, but I need to be in fellowship."

You say, "Well, I am really busy, Rich."

Frankly, everyone is busy. It is all a matter of where we prioritize work and everything else. We need relationship with other Christians. And we need to serve other Christians.

"Well, I am not in town every week."

Then go to a group on those weeks when you are in town and you won't be offending the people in the group. You can explain to them that it is not because you are uncommitted. There is no shame in going when you can go.

"But I have children."

Go to a group that has childcare.

I am telling you, you have no excuse for not being in a group other than you just don't want to get connected. And that is a line that God wants you to step over, just as that woman who feared she wouldn't be accepted because of her poverty needed to overcome that. You may need to overcome your shyness or hurt from churches in the past or overcome the way you were treated by a former leader or overcome the fact that you don't know people yet. But you can overcome your fear. Like the testimony I just read, you can choose to get into relationship with other people in this church.

And Jesus says that the church has great potential because of him. Listen to these affirmations.

"You are Peter and on this rock, I will build my church."

In the face of all the opposition we have as a church – the culture, the pressure of the media, the moral relativism and the divorce culture and all the pornography and materialism – what an encouragement to read of the Lord's commitment to build the church and build individuals in the church. What I see out of this statement "I will build" is that Jesus himself is the great disciple maker.

What that does for me is that it enables me to calm down. The fact is most churches function like everyone in the church has drunk too many cups of coffee. We are so pressurized, pushing nervously and trying to manipulate, racing around trying to do the job of making disciples. We have our roles, don't get me wrong, we need to be quite intentional about our job of making disciples, but there is something that enables us to go about the job of making disciples with a

gracefulness, a peacefulness, an ease, when you see that Jesus is the great disciple maker.

Sometimes I can get quite critical about what I am accomplishing and what other leaders are accomplishing here in the church and what the church is accomplishing. I can get quite negative. But I tell you there has been very few things that have been more encouraging to me and to my faith recently than in reading through people's testimonies. That is why you should write them down. When I see what Jesus has done, it is so great. He is building his church. Listen to this one.

"My life was the property of alcohol and drugs. Substance abuse had left me completely unable to associate with reality. I was laying in my bed one evening. My body and mind exhausted from drugs. I was depressed. I felt like I was suffocating and I wanted to die. I tried to fight it, but it was useless. I had no strength. I could no longer struggle; it was over. I gave up.

That evening as I lay there hoping I would be dead, God gave me life. Confused and numb, I had little comprehension of the loving presence that I encountered. It was a presence of hope lifting me up, releasing me from what was killing me.

Time passed slowly and although I was recovering, my life seemed to lack meaning. I was basically an observer, uncertain of just about everything. I was in college and my belief in God had grown along with so many questions. Where was I to go? I had some friends who were Christians and through their fellowship I began to find the truth. At this time, I had a dream and it cleared some of the doubts that weighed in my mind. In the dream I was tempted by demons as I walked through the darkness. All the while I was being embraced with a peaceful contentment. I

came to the Columbus Vineyard and gave my heart to Jesus Christ last Easter Sunday. It was the most honest moment in my life. My feelings were uninhibited. I felt finally alive and conscious as I was overwhelmed by God's love. Life is good and I am glad to be alive."

This was something Jesus did. Not just years of us wrestling and struggling in counseling. Jesus said, "I will build."

Here is a second great affirmation, "I will build my church." A church that nothing can stop is a church that recognizes that it belongs to Jesus and continually gives itself back to Jesus. We don't own the church. In how many churches in America does the pastor come in and try to change a few things and finds he is running his head into a wall because the people say, "This is our church. We have never done things that way before. We don't want new people to dominate." Or the people say, "We shouldn't get too big. We are getting too big. We don't like all of these newcomers taking over our church. We feel uncomfortable with the change. We feel uncomfortable with the current move of the Holy Spirit. We feel uncomfortable with spiritual gifts."

A church that cannot be stopped has a fundamental identity that we don't own the church; we are owned by the Lord Jesus Christ. It is his church. He determines how big it is going to get. He determines what is going to happen here. He determines whether we are going to have healing. He determines how we are going to exercise spiritual gifts. In other words, a church that can't be stopped is a church that lets God be God.

John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard movement, used to say, and I think it was a prophetic word to the church in America that Jesus was saying to the church, "I want my church back." Church is not our private country club where we determine the membership according to our rules.

Jesus says, "I will build my church and the gates of Hades, the gates of Hell will not overcome it." Nothing can stop the church. Not the powers of death. Not the government. Not secularism. Not post-modernism. Not the New Age. Roman persecution couldn't stop the church; it only made it grow. False teachers in the first few centuries couldn't stop the church, it only made the church grow. Violent opposition from the communists, from the Nazis, and from the Muslims could not stop the church; they only made it grow. Do you know more Iranians have become Christians in the last 15 years than in the previous century? Under the Ayatollahs, with the entire fundamentalist Muslim religion, more Iranians have turned to Christ in the last 15 years than in the previous century. Do you know that Christianity has grown in China by a minimum of 2000% since the communists took over a half-century ago? The best figures we have of the number of Chinese Christians back in 1949 was about 3-4 million. The lowest figure of Christians, the most conservative figure in China right now is 60 million Chinese Christians. Some people estimate 100-120 million.

You could go around the world. The gates of hell cannot overcome the church. As you look at the future of America you might see a lot of dark clouds and forces of opposition. As long as we let it remain his church, as long as we let God be God, as long as we exercise our spiritual authority, we will not be overcome.



Jesus goes on and says, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

A church that nothing can stop is a church that exercises its spiritual authority. When Jesus speaks about binding and loosing, these words are technical terms in Judaism in Jesus’ day. It was a term for teaching. Another way to put it would be a term for closing the door or opening the door through teaching. When a church looses someone, what it is doing is opening the door to the kingdom of heaven through the proclamation of the gospel. A person is loosed from their sins. A person is set free when they receive the gospel. The church exercises its binding power when it preaches the gospel. And a person rejects the gospel so that they are bound in unforgiveness and guilt awaiting a future judgment.

Some churches don’t use the keys to the kingdom. They have stopped preaching the gospel, the only message that will save people and let them into the kingdom. Some churches just assume that because they are there, they are members of the kingdom. Some churches don’t call people to clear decisions. They don’t teach that there is a need for each one of us to receive Christ and to submit to his Lordship. At some point in your life you need to entirely give up control and surrender to Jesus as your master and king. Some churches don’t teach people that you need a miracle to occur in your life, the miracle of rebirth, where you come alive to God, where the lights of the universe go on, where you recognize in Jesus – God coming to you.

But a church that is committed to exercise its authority in proclaiming the gospel, a church that is committed to exercise its authority in disciplining church

members where it's biblically required, a church that is committed to exercise its authority by casting out demons, that is a church that nothing can stop.

Last point, real quick. A church that nothing can stop is a church that doesn't choose the path of least resistance. It says, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

Jesus had previously alluded to the fact that he would be killed, but he always did it in a figure of speech, in metaphor. He mentions how the bridegroom would be taken away and then people would fast. He mentions in Matt. 12 that as Jonah was in the belly of the fish, so the Son of Man would be three days in the heart of the earth. He mentions in John 2 that as the Temple would be destroyed in three days it would be rebuilt. He was talking about his body.

But now he is coming out plainly and saying for the first time that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hand of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law and that he had to be killed. It was necessary. There is a mustness that Jesus die in order that we can be saved.

Note Peter's reaction. "Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never Lord,' he said. 'This shall never happen to you.' Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan, you are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'"

A church that nothing can stop is a church that doesn't choose the path of least resistance. Listen, it is only as we choose the path of obedience, even if we

encounter pain along the way, it is only as we choose the path of obedience that we overcome all opposition. Why does Jesus say to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan” when Peter objects to Jesus’ claim that he is going to have to suffer and die? Why does Jesus call him a satan, a devil?

Because the devil is the one who is always behind an offer of compromise. The devil is always the one who is saying, “Don’t draw the line so sharply. I can make things easier for you. You can straddle both horses. You can have God and be disobedient as well. You don’t have to pay a price to follow Jesus. Don’t make it so tough on yourself.”

I know as a pastor I am regularly offered a compromise by the devil. I know when I get up here to speak in our church there are many, many divorced people. And I know that when I clearly teach on what Jesus said about divorce that some of you are going to be offended. I know that. Because some of you have been legitimately divorced according to the words of Jesus and some of you were illegitimately divorced. And as you hear about what Jesus said, you will find some level of offense.

And so there is always a compromise. Can’t you soften that? Can’t you bend those words? Can’t you make Jesus’ words more palatable?

We are constantly faced, friends, with this choice – whatever job you have, wherever you are in your family system – you are constantly faced with this choice of either doing what comes easy or being faithful to your Lord. Are you going to discipline yourself to do what is difficult? Get up early? Spend time with God? Force

yourself to go to sleep early the night before? Are you going to do what's comfortable or sacrifice for the purpose of promoting the kingdom?

"Well, we can give some money for the building campaign and we will not have to adjust our lifestyle."

Or, "We will sacrifice. We will do what is difficult."

Satan is always offering a compromise. You can always have it all. You can have the easy way and you can have God. But Jesus says, "No, if you are going to follow me, you are going to have to go on a different path than the path of least resistance."

The Christian life is a difficult life. Jesus says, "The road is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life and there are few that find it. The way is broad and easy that leads to destruction." And this is where we are always living, friends. But the church that nothing can stop is a church that says we are going to spend our lives on pleasing God. And even if occasionally we become displeasing to a person, that we are occasionally, not intentionally, but because we are Christians and are faithful to God we are displeasing, we are inconvenient people for our parents, sisters, brothers, or in-laws, or co-workers, or people in the government, or professors – even if we are inconvenient, displeasing people, that's OK because we are followers of Jesus Christ.

If we live this way, nothing is going to be able to stop the Columbus Vineyard. Let's pray.

## A Church That Nothing Can Stop

- I. A Church That Lets Jesus Define Who He Is (vv. 13-16)
  - A. What Do People Say? (v. 13-14)
  - B. What Do You Say? (v. 15)
    - 1. Personal Question
    - 2. Confrontive Question
  - C. What Does the Bible Say? (v. 16)
- II. A Church That is Confident About Its Potential (vv. 17-18)
  - A. One Great Revelation (v.17)
  - B. Three Great Affirmations (v. 18)
    - 1. I Will Build
    - 2. My Church
    - 3. And the Gates of Hell Will Not Overcome
- III. A Church That Exercises Spiritual Authority (v. 19)

#### IV. A Church That Doesn't Choose the Path of Least Resistance (vv. 21-23)