

Freeway Series: Sermon 2, “Awareness”

April 17, 2016

Welcome back to our Freeway Series. This is really important stuff! Here's the idea: we've got all this junk inside – what those dudes called guck, and muck, and yuck – and it's holding us back. Listen: Jesus said that he came here and he died for us, and he rose from the dead so that we could have life to the fullest – to the fullest – not only in the next life, but right now – here on earth. But that's not how most Jesus followers experience life here on earth. We carry around all this baggage: hurt and pain we won't let go of, myths and lies we buy into, irrational worries and fears that steal our joy and our peace. We carry around burdens we weren't meant to carry. We feel distant from God when he created us to do life with him. Instead of letting life flow through us into the people around us, we feel like life wears us out. We feel guilty, judged, we trapped – even though Jesus came to set us free, to give us life to the fullest, to show us what we are calling a “Free-way.”

So last week we kicked this series off by talking about God – I'm afraid I called him an extraordinarily weird dad ... in the very best way. Do you remember? We went back to the parable of the prodigal son (which is more about the dad than the 2 boys). Jesus is trying to tell us that God can be trusted. His heart can be trusted. He wants a different kind of life for us, and he can make it happen ... if we'll cooperate. Well, today we start talking about what it means to cooperate with God. What does this “Free-way” look like? What do we have to do to get rid of this junk that is weighing us down and holding us back?

Well, step 1 is “Awareness.” It may be one of the most difficult steps, because most of us are not very self-aware. But before we can deal with our mess – before we can take our mess to God – we have to see it, we have to admit it, then we can take it to God ... because we are not strong enough, or smart enough, or good enough to fix ourselves. So the path to freedom starts with awareness – awareness.

Now, sometimes our messes are so obvious that we know we've got them.

- I know I have a temper. Do you? Any of you guys, when you're mad, say things or do things that just aren't right? You don't have to raise your hands – just be ruthlessly honest inside.

- I know I am strong willed: that means I like to get my own way, and sometimes I run over people to get it. Any of you guys like that?
- I know I have a problem with forgiving. I know God wants me to forgive, but sometimes it's hard for me to let things go. Any of you like that? Are there people you've held a grudge against for months, or years, some of you for decades.
- Maybe you know you've got a problem with lust. You know your mind wanders where it shouldn't go. You know your eyes linger where they shouldn't.
- Or maybe you know you've got a problem with greed, or with selfishness, or with a hypercritical mind and a seeringly sharp tongue – I struggle with that.

Most of us have these messy spots in us that we know are there? But sometimes we just don't have a clue! At the least, they are embarrassing; sometimes way worse. We've all had this kind of stuff happen...

- We're talking to somebody and they keep glancing at our teeth, because there's something between our teeth and we don't have a clue.
- Or someone notices toilet paper stuck to our shoe, and we have no idea how long it's been there.
- Or you find out your fly has been down. You don't know how long! That can be embarrassing.
- Or your nose is dirty. Or your feet stink – and you just don't know.

You get the idea. But sometimes it is way more than embarrassing – it can be devastating. Sometimes we have these blindspots for things in us that are really serious. There are things we do – sometimes we think they are okay – but they are messing us up. They are dragging us down.

- Most arrogant people see themselves as confident ... but that's not how we come across.
- Most self-centered people are oblivious to how they impose themselves on people around them.
- Very few prideful people see their pride as sin.
- Most spendaholics won't admit they have a problem.
- Most alcoholics, addicts, most of those who are addicted to porn, or gambling, or anything else – they won't admit they are addicts.
- Most people who are overeaters don't see themselves as gluttons.

We all have these spiritual blind spots, and if someone challenges our messiness, we get hurt; their accusations seem offensive... Our inclination is to protect ourselves, to get defensive, to deny our issues – even though our issues are sabotaging our joy. So ... do you really want to be aware of the messes inside you? Do you really want to know what God sees inside you? Do you really want to know the junk he sees inside you? You might not think it's junk, but it's his opinion that counts. Guys, step 1 is "Awareness." Before we can deal with a mess we have to see it, we have to admit it, then we can take it to God ... because we are not strong enough, or smart enough, or good enough to fix ourselves. So the path to freedom starts with awareness.

Okay, if you have a Bible with you open up to Matthew chapter 8. We're going to get there in just a minute. Matthew 8 ... we'll have key verses on screen as well. Now Matthew 8 starts with a story about Jesus healing a leper. But before we get there, let me set the context for you. The previous 3 chapters, Matthew 5-7, contain what is called the Sermon on the Mount. It's one of the most famous parts of the Bible. And in it Jesus is doing some serious cushion flipping (that will make sense if you were here last week). He's showing how a lot of us look okay on the outside, but if you dig down inside, there's a lot of junk in there. God looks at our hearts – and every single one of us has stuff inside that is kind of ugly. And the people who were listening to Jesus were amazed at his insight, and at his authority. No one had ever taught like Jesus before ... No one ever has since.

Then, right after the Sermon on the Mount, there is a story about a guy who was aware of really big problem – his mess was blatantly obvious. Some messes are undeniable. It was a problem he couldn't fix, so he brought it to Jesus – smart guy! I mean, some problems are just no brainers, right? Here are some no-brainers ...

- This guy was having trouble with his car. So he pops the hood ... it wasn't that hard to diagnose the problem.
- This school was trying to help, but their sign doesn't inspire a whole lot of confidence, does it? And I figure that street probably leads to that school.
- This guy couldn't figure out why his mouse didn't work. I mean some problems are no brainers, right?

And this guy who came to Jesus had a no-brainer mess, a problem he couldn't hide. It was obvious to him, and it was obvious to everyone around him. And it completely dominated his life. Now leprosy in the Bible didn't have to be the kind of leprosy that is diagnosed today. But still – no disease was more dreaded in the ancient world than leprosy.

- They became complete outcasts. Lepers couldn't be close to people. If a leper had to be near people, he had to yell out, "Unclean, unclean," so people could avoid him.
- So this guy couldn't hug his wife, if he had one; he couldn't hold his kids, he couldn't sit next to you in church – he couldn't go to church. He couldn't even live in his house. He was an outsider now.

So this was a problem this guy lived with every day; a problem anybody who looked at him could see. It was clear as day. He was a complete and total mess. And this poor guy takes an incredible risk – he approaches a holy man. Now, he probably could have been stoned for doing that. But what does he have to lose? So he approaches Jesus and he asks for help.

What he probably didn't realize, what I suspect no one else realized, was that he had a problem bigger than his physical leprosy. You see, in that world, leprosy wasn't just a physical disease. Lepers would have carried a profound sense of shame. It's weird, but most people in what world thought leprosy was curse from God on a terrible sinner. This guys had to have done something really, really bad to be struck by God with leprosy. You see, the physical separation wasn't just to protect other people from the disease, it was so the evil this person had done wouldn't contaminate anybody either. Lepers were like the walking dead, and people would treat them like they were already dead. And Jesus had this ability to look underneath the skin, into the heart. He had the ability to diagnose leprosy of the soul. Because he was God – and God doesn't look at, he sees into ... Which is why they could pray this prayer ...

You see, there is a prayer in the Old Testament that blows my mind. I think we pray it sometimes, without really thinking about what it means. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts." (Ps 139.23) I don't think that part is too hard to pray. He's God, and we really can't hide anything from God. We keep no secrets from God. He's ... God. It's the second part that blows my mind. He says,

“Point out anything in me that offends you (show me anything in me that offends you ... Really? Do you want him to do that?), and lead me along the path of everlasting life.” (Ps 139.24) Hmm, do you really want God to do that? Do you really want God to point out anything in you that offends him? Do you really want to know?

You see, the first step of the Free-Way is “Awareness.” But before we can deal with a mess inside us we have to see it, we have to admit it, then we can take it to God ... because we are not strong enough, or smart enough, or good enough to fix ourselves. So the path to freedom starts with awareness. And that involves praying this prayer. It involves asking God: Show me what you see, God, under the cushions. Make me aware of the junk that is holding me back, that is steering me wrong. Show me what is messing up my life.

Now, I have no clue what he’ll show you, nor can I tell you how he’ll show you. Sometimes God works through people; sometimes he works through his Word; sometimes he works directly on our hearts. But my suspicion is, he’ll show you something, if you really want to know.

- Maybe he’ll show you that the hurt in your life has caused you to pull away from people. Maybe you’ve built a bit of a wall around your heart, to protect yourself. The problem is, your wall prevents you from loving people the way God wants you to.
- Or, maybe he’ll show you that when you get tired you start to lose your filters. That happens with me. When I get tired, when I get discouraged, I tend to get mean. Sometimes I see it in myself, sometimes I don’t.
- Or, maybe in a culture like ours that is obsessed with beauty, he’ll show you that you are too consumed with “your looks.” Or maybe you are too consumed with how other people look, and that makes you petty, and jealous.
- Or, maybe he will show you that you just worry too much. You don’t trust him. You don’t give him credit for the blessings he pours out on you.
- Or, maybe he will challenge your anger, your bitterness.
- Or, maybe he will challenge your lust, or your greed, or your laziness, or your selfishness.
- Or, maybe he will challenge your propensity to hang on to guilt, and shame – when he’s already forgiven you.

- I don't know. Maybe he will challenge your propensity to think that you are smarter than he is. Do you know what it means to be a Jesus "follower"? It means you do things his way even when you don't understand him, even when you don't agree with him. Because he is Lord, we're not. Sometimes we know what God wants us to do, and we so-called "Jesus-followers" tell him, "On this one, God, think I'm smarter than you are. On this one I think my way is better than your way." And that's really, really ... really stupid.

So we pray: God, search me ... God, test me ... God, show me ... how I disappoint you, how I offend you. God, help me to be the person you desire me to be ... because I know that's the only way I will experience the life you want me to live. God, at least ... reveal to me as much as I can handle ... and help me handle it... ... We'll get there, in a few minutes.

So this leper – he's sick on the outside – he knows that; and he's sick on the inside – he may not know that; he comes to Jesus and he says these amazing words: "Lord, if you are willing – if you are willing -- you can make me clean." (Matthew 8.2) I don't know how he knew, but he has this faith, this trust, this confidence in Jesus. "If you are willing – I know you can -- ... will you?"

You see, sometimes we're not sure that he is willing. Some people have this image of God ...

- That's a picture of God by Michelangelo. Would you go to him for help? Look at that face!
- Some folks think he is up there with his hand hovering over a smite button, just waiting for one of us to mess up.

And there are other people who think God really doesn't care. Some of you fear that he is either God the smiter, or God the indifferent. Well ... if you really want to know what God is really like ... listen to this.

"Lord," the man says, "if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean." So Jesus reaches out and touches him. "I am willing," he says. "Be healed!" (Is that a word of God for you?) And instantly the leprosy disappeared." (Matthew 8.2-3) Now listen, God doesn't always do that when we ask him to heal us on the outside. He has his reasons. But the point is this: God is not indifferent, God is not hostile. He's not indifferent

to you, he's not hostile to you. He's not up there trying to think of ways to make you miserable. He came that we might have life ... to the fullest, remember?

Now there are a couple pieces to the story we might miss, if we're not careful. In that world, if a leper comes up to you, it would be normal to pick up a rock and drop him, if you could. Instead, it says ... "Reaching out his hand, extending his hand" – not like this (*stop*), not like this (*fist*), but like this – "reaching out his hand, Jesus touches him." (Matthew 8.3) Now guys this blew their minds. Jesus didn't need to touch him. Jesus healed guys with just a word. Jesus healed guys who weren't even in the same county. Jesus doesn't need to touch this guy to heal him... But this guy needed to be touched. Because the healing he needed wasn't just on the outside, he needed a heart healing. And the crowds had to have gasped! A holy man just touched a leper.

And can you imagine what the leper was thinking? He just ... touched me! Have you ever ached to be touched? I'm not talking about anything inappropriate. I'm talking about a touch of acknowledgement, a touch of acceptance, a touch of love. Well guys, Jesus is showing us who God is, and what God does. God touches the untouchable. And when he does that, we are healed, inside. Jesus doesn't just heal this guy's body, he did the far more difficult, the far more important – Jesus healed his heart.

Guys, if you have ever wondered whether God is willing to heal your heart – here is the answer. Jesus says, "I am willing, be healed. Do you believe that? Do you really?"

- Have you ever pushed back and thought, "Where I've been, what I've done, it's just too much." Well God is telling you, "No it's not; I'm still willing to heal you."
- Maybe you're thinking, "I've tried, I've cried, I've done everything I can. I don't know whether God can help me face my addiction?" God says, "I'm willing, I can."
- Maybe you are struggling in a relationship – with a friend, or a spouse, and you are wondering, "Is there any hope left, God? Can it be fixed? Can you at least fix me?" And God says, "I won't force myself on them, but I'm willing to fix you."
- Maybe it's anger weighing you down, some unforgiveness, some bitterness. God says, "I'm willing to heal you, if you trust me."

- Maybe it's shame, or guilt that just won't let go. Maybe you feel like you'll never be able to look in a mirror without a sense of dishonor, ever again. God says, "I'm willing to heal you, if you trust me. But you've got to bring it to me. You've got to let me do it my way."

You see, the physical healing Jesus worked on this guy dazzled them; but I think the spiritual healing he experienced was infinitely more dazzling. I know Jesus came to heal some people physically, but that was not his mission from God. He came to heal hearts. He came to point us back towards God. He came to set us free. He came to give us new spirits, so we can be fully healed, so life can flow through us again.

This guy asks Jesus, "Are you willing to heal me?" But guys, the real question is this, "Do you really want to be healed? Are you really willing to let him heal you ... his way – not your way, his way? Are you willing to tell him, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life."

We're going to sing a song of worship. This is what we're going to sing to him:

- Come out of hiding You're safe here with Me
- There's no need to cover what I already see
- You've got your reasons ... but I hold your peace

Guys, let's not just talk about it; let's do it. Let's pray that prayer together. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life." (Ps 139.24) Because healing starts with awareness.

I don't know how he will show you what needs healing. Sometimes it's through people. sometimes it's through the Word. In fact, God may have already started working on you this morning. Sometimes he just grips your heart – you know he's working on you.

I'm going ask you to do something you might think is kind of weird. I want to ask you to go to your knees, if you can. I know some of you can't, it's physically hard – if it will hurt you, don't even try. But sometimes what we

do on the outside helps prepares our hearts. And this is a time of surrender... Will you kneel with me? ...

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you ... (repeat) ... and lead me along the path of everlasting life.”

- God, I know that there are things inside me you want to fix ...
 - I know you are willing to heal me, well I want to be healed ...
- God, I know there are things inside me that you see, and I don't ...
 - Show me what you need to deal with ...
 - I know you are willing to heal me, well I want to be healed...
- God, I know there may be things I can't handle right now
 - I ask you to strengthen me, so you can go deeper
- God, however ... through your word, through a friend, through the nudgings of your Spirit ... make me aware, and give me the courage to be Christian.