





Freedom to Live Freedom Initiative Week I

Teacher Overview

- + Main Point: True Freedom to Live comes in complete surrender to Christ.
- + Opening Prayer
- + Story of Hard Times (You may use mine, yours and/or ask someone in class to share)
- + Primary Scripture: Matthew 11:1-5
- + Lesson Summary
- + Secondary Scriptures: Matthew 11:28-30, Matthew 10:39
- + Clay's Story of Giving (I encourage you to share your own story at some point
- + Discussion Questions
- + Sermon Application
- + Closing Prayer

Opening Prayer

A Story of Hard Times...

2007 was the hardest year of my life.

I'll spare you the details but it ended with me sitting on the beach at Gulf Shores by myself watching the moonlight reflect off the waves while my six week old second child, lay in the hospital in Foley, Alabama after having already spent most of his young life in other hospitals. We had medical bills totaling around four times our annual income, no savings and (because of a botched house closing due to the market crash) two mortgage payments.

That night Christ's words kept flooding my mind: I've come that you might have life more abundant. My life didn't feel abundant. It felt heavy, bound and hopeless.

But on that beach that night God gave me some perspective. That night became a tipping point changing the way Leigh Ann and I thought about and approached money. That night we began the process of completely re-aligning our priorities to reflect our faith.

Eight years later we're still driving old clunker cars. We recently considered upgrading and chose against it so we could continue paying off debt at a high rate and so we could have the freedom to continue to give back to God as he has given so much to us.

This feels a lot more like abundant life.

Clay

Do you have a story of God's faithfulness in hard times?

Scripture

Matthew 11:1-5

After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

Lesson Summary

The blind see
Lame walk
Lepers cleansed
Deaf hear
Dead raised
And good news is proclaimed to the poor.

People are free to live.

Just a few paragraphs later Jesus adds:

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. **Matthew 11:28-30**

Sometimes life is hard. Bills stack up. The diagnosis seems grim. Kids. Work. School. Sometimes the world puts such a heavy burden on us that it's all we can do to get out of bed in the morning.

That's not the burden of Christ.

And it's not what the Freedom Initiative is about. This is not about one more thing to do or one more group who wants a hand out.

This is about you and me learning to drop the heavy burdens of the world and live a life focussed on the causes and burdens of Christ in order that we might live an abundant life.

The fact is, Jesus talked about money a lot, not because he needed it, but because money's a pretty good barometer for your faith,. He taught about it because where we put our money is a good indicator of where we put our priorities. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be.

That's what the Freedom Initiative is about... shining a light on our priorities so we can align them with Christ, dropping off the burdens of the world to take up the yoke of Christ... the only burden that brings freedom to live.

Clay's Story Giving

Leigh Ann and I are not the family who's giving from net worth. We're in debt. We're comfortable, but we're doing the Dave Ramsey snowball trying to retire our debt so that one day they can live and give at a higher level. We're already giving ten percent. And for us, anything more than that feels like stealing from the snowball.

I suspect there are several families here at Clearbranch in a similar situation.

So here's what we're doing for the Freedom Initiative: One night a week our family is eating rice and beans for supper. It's all a lot of folks around the world have for supper every night. So it's a good teaching opportunity for the kids. The meal is negligible in cost so we are essentially saving the cost of 4 meals per month times the five people in the family. Twenty meals a month. And we're putting most of the difference toward the Freedom Initiative. The nights we have rice and beans we explain to our kids that many children around the world eat that every day and it's all they have. As an added bonus, our kids tend to ask questions about poverty and be more thankful for what we have on rice and bean night. Subsequently, they tend to clean their plates with less fuss. Win, win.

Discussion Questions

What yoke(s) of the world might be preventing you from being free to live an abundant ife?
What might the yoke of Christ look like in your life?

Just one chapter earlier Jesus said:

Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. **Matthew 10:39**

The irony of the gospel is that when we seek abundant life on our own through all the means we could imagine: money, relationships, power, chemicals, etc. we end up losing our life. Freedom to live comes when we completely re-alignment our priorities to match the priorities of Christ.

What priorities in your life might actually be robbing your Freedom to live?
If Christ were given control of your calendar or your checkbook, how might he man them differently?
What does Freedom to live abundantly look like for Clearbranch?
What priorities might we be able to align better with Christ's if some obstacles veremoved?
During the Freedom Initiative for the next few weeks, how can the group pray for yo experience true freedom to live?
Sermon Application
This week in the sermon Vaughn read the story of the boy who shared his lunch. Because boy made room in his life and shared what he had, God multiplied the gift to feed the multitude.
What ways can you create margin in your life in order to share your gifts with God?

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, who multiplies our gifts, help us to find and create margin in our calendars, budgets and lives to be used for your kingdom. And free us to take on the yoke of Christ in order to live more abundant lives. Amen.



Freedom to Give Freedom Initiative Week II

Teacher Overview

- + Main Point: Our relationship with Christ frees us to give joyfully.
- + Opening Prayer
- + My Favorite Night of Giving (You may use my story, yours or ask someone in class to share)
- + Primary Scripture: Mark 10:17-22
- + Lesson Summary
- + Discussion Questions
- + Secondary Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:1-5
- + Aliece's Testimony of Trusting God
- + Discussion Questions
- + Sermon Application
- + Closing Prayer

Opening Prayer

My Favorite Night of Giving

One fall before Leigh Ann and I had children, we went with several other students from seminary to the National Youth Workers Convention in Nashville, TN.

There were, all together, five or ten thousand youth pastors, Sunday School teachers and small group leaders in attendance. And we descended on downtown Nashville like locusts. Every night after the afternoon session, we'd leave the Convention Center flooding Broadway with a sea of goatees and Christian t-shirts.

A few of my friends and I quickly noticed the high concentration of homeless men on every corner and were convicted to do something. So the last night we skipped the session and took to the streets with the goal of inviting guys to eat with us.

Some declined. They just wanted money. Most were confused. In the end we talked two gentlemen into joining us for supper. And after being turned away from a few restaurants who wouldn't allow the men with us inside, we found a smoky barbecue honky-tonk dive right on the main strip with a couple of guys playing acoustic guitars on stage... country music of course. I remember it being smoky because I was thankful for every cigarette that covered the smell of our guests.

We grabbed a table right by the stage. We all ordered full racks of ribs even though none of us could finish them knowing we'd give our new friends the leftovers. And before the night was over, Leigh Ann was on stage with the musicians singing classic rock and roll.

It was a transformative night in my life.

And it never would've happened had we not been intentional to give.

Do you	have a s	tory of t	rusting (God in a	new or	difficult	way?
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Scripture

Mark 10:17-22

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother."

"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Lesson Summary

Money can be a great blessing. But it can also be an obstacle to blessings.

Notice the last direction Jesus gave the rich young man. It wasn't just "give". It was "follow me".

It turns out, giving is a step toward following.

Jesus didn't want the rich young man's money. He wanted him. Jesus doesn't want your money either. He wants you.

The rich young man couldn't follow Jesus because he wasn't free to give. He was bound by his own wealth.

This man had an invitation to follow the creator of the universe closely enough to smell him, to share meals at a table with him, to have his life count for something more than his wealth. And he blew it.

Who knows? If he hadn't walked away sulking there might be a book in the bible named for him: The Gospel of the Rich Young Man. He may have carried the gospel to Africa or the Far East. There may have been hymns written about his generosity.

Instead the man left, defeated by his own accomplishments, to a prison of his own possessions.

Discussion Questions		
Have you ever felt like you missed an opportunity to	give?	
If so, why? What was it that caused you not to give?		
How did you feel afterwards and what did you do ab	oout it?	
What might be preventing you from being free to give	ve at this point in	າ your life?

In order to see the flip side of this coin (pun intended) let us turn to an example of joyful giving.

Scripture

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.

Even in the midst of poverty, the Macedonian people begged Paul for the privilege of giving. And their joy overflowed.

But that's not the greatest point of this scripture. The greatest point is that they didn't just give their money. They gave themselves.

Earlier I said giving was a step toward following.

Turns out following is a step toward giving too!

Having given themselves fully to the Lord, they were unburdened by anything that might steal their joy and they were free to give to God's purposes.

If you were in worship you heard Aliece Roden share her story. In case you missed it, here's a recap.

Aliece's Testimony of Trusting God

I've heard God's voice two times in my life.

The first was in the midst of my divorce. Preparing for the custody hearing, praying and agonizing over how to gain custody of my children without a job, God said to me: "Let them go and I'll bring them back."

So I did. At the hearing I told my husband he could have full custody. He didn't want them. He just wanted to spite me. A year later my daughter was living with me and just a few years after that, my son as well.

The second time was several years later. I'd been going to church for a while. I was in a good relationship with God. But I wasn't giving generously. I was tipping. Not tithing. If I had \$5 or \$10 in my purse I'd drop it in the plate. But I didn't intentionally budget 10% of my income to give to God. How could I? I didn't have much. Tithing seemed to be for people who could afford it. Not single moms on a shoestring budget.

Then one day backing out of my driveway I heard God again. "You're stealing from me, Aliece."

That'll get your attention.

I realized I was stealing from God. And I realized it really comes down to one thing: Trust. Do I trust God to care for me? Do I believe God knows about my bills and cares about my well being? And I'm not just talking about getting by. Does God care about me having enough to drive a reliable car and enough to spend a weekend at the beach in the summer?

I decided to put God to the test. So set up a meeting with Vaughn as soon as possible, told him the story and created a plan to give 10% off the top of every paycheck.

And you know what? God proved himself trustworthy. Numbers that shouldn't have added up, added up. I never went without. And most importantly I am more content and at peace with my life and my relationship with God than ever before.

The Bible says God loves a joyful giver. Turns out giving has given me great joy.

iscussion Questions
an you name a time when you gave and were immediately blessed with more?
hat kind of blessings might God have in store for you and for Clearbranch in thiseedom Initiative?

How might those blessings affect your 15 or 50 years?	family and the Clearbranch family for the next
Sermon Application	
	the story of the wee little man, Zacchaeus, who upde wrong he'd done. Zacchaeus, unlike the rich your ution, not sorrow, was his reward.
What are some similarities and difference	ces in Zacchaeus and the rich young man?
What do you think made Zacchaeus gen	nerous where the rich young man was not?

Closing Prayer

God, we are blessed. We have more than we deserve and often more than we even need. Grant us humble and generous hearts that are free to give when you call. Amen.



Freedom to Grow Freedom Initiative Week III

Teacher Overview

- + Main Point: Spiritual growth comes from our connection and obedience to Christ.
- + Opening Prayer
- + Dead Grass (You may use my story, yours and/or ask someone in class to share)
- + Primary Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
- + Lesson Summary
- + Discussion Questions
- + A Story of Obedience in Hard Times
- + Discussion Questions
- + Sermon Application
- + Closing Prayer

Opening Prayer

Dead Grass

I come from a family tree loaded with farmers, agriculturalists and horticulturalists. Both of my grandfathers were farmers. My moms father worked for the Lee County Extension Agency. My grandmother grew camellias. My dad has his PhD in Ag. His brother worked for Ben Hill Griffin Farms in south Florida. His brother-in-law worked for Bonnie Plant Farms. Several cousins and extended family are in horticulture and even my wife, Leigh Ann, has her undergrad in horticulture.

Everyone around me knows how to grow stuff... which makes it all the more comical when their plants die.

My joke with Leigh Ann is that her professors didn't teach her how to keep plants alive but to diagnose why they died. Recently my mom and dad re-sodded their yard with St. Augustine. It was beautiful. Dad watered it everyday, fertilized it, pulled weeds and mowed the lawn like clockwork. It was his masterpiece, until the day he sprayed it with what he thought was fertilizer. Turns out it was Roundup. My dad, who knows the latin names of most grasses and the chemicals in every fertilizer, herbicide and pesticide on the market, killed his lawn. It was an honest mistake done out of oversight not for lack of knowledge. But that doesn't stop us from giving him a hard time about it still today.

Do you have a story of growing (or killing) a plant or tree?					

Scripture

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear."

"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

Lesson Summary

Every seed has the potential to grow but not all do.

Some never even germinate. Some get a good start but never develop deep roots. Some are choked out by weeds. The Freedom Initiative is about becoming fruitful crops.

But first let's look at what keeps us from growing.

Sometimes people just aren't ready to hear. They're not ready to acknowledge their own sin or maybe they acknowledge it but they're not ready to walk away. Some people may not believe they're worthy of forgiveness. Whatever the case, sometimes the seed of faith just doesn't take.

Discussion Questions

Was there ever a time in your life or someone you know (without nan	ning names) wher
you or they were not ready to hear the message of God?		

What did it take for you to change and become receptive to God's word?
Some people are like a flash in the pan. They receive the word with enthusiasm and joy. The one day they're gone. Maybe something happened. Maybe they just got bored. They grew u and out, but they never grew down and deep. They showed all the visible signs of health growth but never developed the invisible depth to provide nutrients and stability for the draugh and storm.
What are practices that create depth of faith?
Who is someone you look up to as deep and well rooted in their faith? And why?
Some people hear, believe and possibly even establish roots. They may even teach a class of lead a ministry. Then through tragedy or stress or even their own success, they forget their first joy. They allow other treasures into their hearts, other seeds that grow and make their lift unfruitful
What are our biggest weeds (threats to our faith) today?
How might we prevent the thorns of life from choking out our fruitfulness?

Finally, there's the fertile soil. That seed produces a return as much as 100 times what was sown.

A Story of Obedience in Hard Times

After operating our own business for several years, tough times dictated that we close the doors. During the time our business was in operation, we incurred a debt of more than \$65,000. This was a mountain of debt that seemed impossible to climb. We prayed about it and decided that filing bankruptcy would not be fair to our creditors, several of which had become close friends. It was very difficult decision because my husband no longer had a job and, even though I was employed, I couldn't support our personal finances and pay back our business debt. This was going to take a miracle. I took on two additional part time jobs and my husband got a job and added several more part-time jobs. He was doing 5 or 6 different things to bring in income.

During this time it was very stressful, but we never stopped tithing.

We talked to our debtors and told them that we did not think it was fair to them to file bankruptcy and if they would trust us, we would make monthly payments and eventually pay them in full with interest. They agreed and we started the process of paying back the debt.

Our largest single debt was more than \$35,000. After a few months of paying on this very large debt, the debtor, a Christian, came to us and stunned us by announcing that our debt had been forgiven. We were overwhelmed with joy and dumbfounded that they would do that. We still had \$20 thousand to pay back, but it brought the total down to a much more reasonable amount. We continued to be faithful to God's call to tithe and after 4 1/2 years of paying our creditors we can now say our debt is paid in full.

God reminded me during this entire process that money is just money. We can make it over and over. No one was hurt or dead. We just had a lot of money to pay back. We were faithful to God and God was faithful to us.

I believe with the Freedom Initiative, we stand at a pivotal point in the history of Clearbranch. As a church, we might see all four seeds in our history. We've been through times of rapid growth, times of hard decline and times of great worry over bills and pastoral changes. Now we stand on the verge of seeing a huge return of faith.

Having been through some tough times, we are now growing with healthy ministries and finances. The Freedom Initiative will allow us over the next decade and beyond to be the center for ministry that God planned from the beginning.

hat are some of your favorite fruits of ministry at Clearbranch?	
Vhat are some ministries you'd like to see us begin or improve in the futu	re?

Sermon Application

Discussion Questions

This week in Vaughn's sermon he told the story of Solomon building the temple and filling it with furnishings his father David had prepared in advance for a ministry he would never enjoy.

What are some ministries the next generation at C we prepare today?	learbranch might	complete tomorrow i
What are ways in which we should be preparing no	ow for that ministr	y?

Closing Prayer

Father, you are God of all generations, hopes and dreams, we ask you to till our soil. Make us fertile ground for the seed of your kingdom to take root in our hearts and produce a crop one hundred fold so that the work we do today may bless generations to come. Amen.



Freedom to Go Freedom Initiative Week IV

Teacher Overview

- + Main Point: Spiritual growth comes from our connection and obedience to Christ.
- + Opening Prayer
- + Mother Teresa (You may use my story, yours and/or ask someone in class to share)
- + Primary Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8
- + Lesson Summary
- + Discussion Questions
- + A Story of Giving Over Time
- + Discussion Questions
- + Sermon Application
- + Closing Prayer

Opening Prayer

Mother Teresa

This one isn't my own, but it seemed to fit so well that I decided to borrow it.

Shane Claiborne is a Christian author, speaker and all around hippie known for promoting social justice through living in community with other believers in downtown Philadelphia. In his book "Irresistible Revolution" he tells the story of when he was in college and feeling a call to do something radical with his faith. He thought, who better to learn radical faith from than Mother Teresa. So after calling every Catholic diocese in the Northeast, he finally got a phone number to the Sisters of Charity in Calcutta.

He recounts the night they called the convent. They had to stay up until sometime in the middle of the night because of the time difference. He dialed the phone and waited. It was at this moment, he realized he didn't have a plan. He figured he'd get a receptionist but didn't even know what to ask. About that time a soft voice said hello. So Shane asked to speak with Mother Teresa.

"Speaking" she said.

Shane explained the call he and his friend had felt on their lives and that they wanted to come to Calcutta to work with the sisters.

"Come"

"Great" Shane replied. "What do we need to do to set it up"

"Nothing. Just come."

"When? For how long? What should we pack?"

"Just come."

Shane and his friend went to Calcutta. They had no return flight, no plan, no mission, just a backpack and an invitation from Mother Teresa herself to come and see what God is doing.

Have you ever gone somewhere or done something	g you never wo	uld have if you ha	adn't
felt God was calling?			

Scripture

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;

the whole earth is full of his glory."

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Lesson Summary

But what about my job? What about my family? How long will be gone? What exactly will I do?

Having seen the fullness of God's glory Isaiah asked none of those questions. He just went. It's the same story with the disciples. Jesus said, "Follow me" and they did. They left their jobs, their possessions, their families and their security to go.

No plan.

No goodbyes.

Nothing but the shoes on their feet and an invitation.

Discussion Questions

Often the things holding us back are, in themselves	s, good thin	ngs. What	are the	good
things for which you are responsible? Who is dependi	ing on you?			

Obviously God knows about our families who are depending on us and He has a bigger stake in their well being than even we do. So we should trust God to take care of those issues.

But if we're honest, sometimes the things holding us back aren't so noble. Ambition, fear, control... Think back to the rich young man Jesus asked to sell everything and follow him. The man walked away sad, imprisoned by his own wealth.

What else might keep you from dropping your nets and following?		
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A Story of Giving Over Time

I know of a household that had plenty for the days' needs, but little more than that. It was a household challenged economically as the Father's career had been cut short due to illness, so income was not in abundance. Yet this family incredibly found a way to faithfully tithe whatever money did come into the home, with consistency and without fail, over decades of time.

I am the son of that household and in the notion of God's blessing bestowed from one generation to another, I stand on the shoulders of those that went before me and benefit from their faithful giving. My family too now gives in the same manner as my parents, albeit somewhat more easily as God has continued to bless us in abundance. But even now our family has been faithful for decades to these same principles of giving.

The Clearbranch Freedom Initiative is not only about freeing our Church from the burden of excessive debt that we have borne for many years now that hinders our ability to fully be in service to others in extended ways, it is also about giving families in our Church the opportunity to see Freedom in their own personal finances, both now and into the future. It is about creating space for us to learn how to respond to Christ's church with our financial resources as we do with our service in other ways. It is counter-intuitive to think that as you give more away, you will have more to meet your own needs, but when was Christ's message and his Gospel of life common to our culture?

Stepping out on faith is never easy. There has to be a big payback to risk it. God is not a computer where if provide the proper input, He immediately spits out the predictable benefit to you. He is interested in a relationship with you and your family and that is something that takes time. But His response to your faithful acts WILL result in blessing. Blessing that will extend to future generations.

Is taking a small portion of who you are today to give away in exchange for God's promises to bless those that will live well beyond you worth it.... YES.

Discussion Questions	
What example of giving did your family model for you?	
What example of giving do you want to pass down to your family?	
In your biggest dreams, with nothing tying you down, what might you do for Go kingdom?	a't
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In your biggest dreams, with nothing holding Clearbranch down, what more might we for God's Kingdom?	do
Sermon Application	
This week in Vaughn's sermon he read the story of the Good Samaritan and challenged us live more simply in order that others might simply live.	to
In what ways might you need to simplify your life in order to be free to go wherever a whenever God may call?	nd
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Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, free us from all things both real and perceived that would keep us from dropping all that we have and are to follow