

FREEWAY

JUD WILHITE | *Awareness*

PART 1: *Living the aware life*

Welcome everyone to a new series that I am so excited about called Freeway: a not so perfect guide to freedom. Ever since my friend Mike Foster told me about this idea, showed me the workbook and shared the stories of what Freeway is doing in the lives of people all across the country I thought, this is something the Central family has to do. I am so hopeful for what it can mean to our lives as individuals and as a church.

To kick off today I want to talk about messes. Think about the last mess you had to deal with. Maybe it was a meal you had to clean up after, or a spilled drink or a broken glass. For those of you with kids under two it might literally have been a mess as in a messy diaper. Messes are a part of life that we deal with as they come up, but sometimes the most challenging messes are the kinds that grow unseen right under our noses. We have this L shaped couch that is always separating, so I got motivated this past week and got some brackets and I was going to install them on this sectional so it would stay put. I lifted up the cushion and underneath it was a full blown wadded up quesadilla [quesadilla pic]. I have no idea how long this thing was sitting under the cushion, but I immediately knew my son had some explaining to do. Then I pulled up the other cushion and we've got M and M packets, crumbs, you name it. Don't flip your couch cushions without taking a moment to prepare your heart for what you are about to see. And don't flip your couch cushions unless you time to clean up the horrors you are about to encounter. It could be Fruit loops, chips, M&Ms, popcorn, pens, pencils, toys from when my kids were little—and a day's calories worth of crumbs. Now here's the thing, for a long, long time I have been sitting on top of that mess. Crud just sunk into the cracks and gathered there, and I had no idea. Once I became aware, it was unpleasant—it was an interruption—but I was finally able to clear away the stuff that, quite frankly, grosses me out.

That's really what this Freeway series is about: ***we want to flip the cushions in our lives and clear out some of the crud that's been gathering there.*** Because whether we realize it or not, the hurts, memories, false assumptions and fears that settle into our hearts hold us back from a life of true freedom. There are far too many of us in this room carrying burdens we aren't meant to carry. Far too many who feel distant from God when they are invited to be close to Him. Far too many who are worn out by life, rather than having life flow out from them into others. Far too many who feel judged, guilty and trapped when they were made to be free. All these problems, these messes, they lurk beneath the cushions. They gather, right beneath our noses and we've been sitting on them for years. But that is not God's plan. He wants us to be set free and healed. Swept clean of all that crud. But the first step is always the hardest and most shocking: the step of awareness. Before you can deal with a mess, you need to see the mess, admit the mess and ask for Jesus to help straighten it out. Awareness is the first step on the path to true freedom. Awareness begins by discovering your mess, but ends by discovering God's Love.

As always, we begin with scripture. If you brought your bible or mobile devices and want to follow along, today we'll be in the book of Matthew chapter 8. We'll also bring the verses up on the side screens. This is a story about Jesus healing a man, but what happened in the chapters before is key. Jesus has just delivered a famous sermon called the Sermon on the Mount. A large group of people gathered on a mountainside to hear him teach, and He was flipping cushions all over the place—showing people how everyone, everywhere is a mess, no matter how good they look on the outside. Jesus was all about looking beneath the surface and right into the heart, and the

Bible says all the people were amazed by his teaching. They could not believe the absolute authority of His words. They were thoroughly wowed, but one man was more than amazed by the teaching, he was aware of his problem.

Matthew 8:1-2 (New Living Translation): Large crowds followed Jesus as he came down the mountainside. Suddenly, a man with leprosy approached him and knelt before him. “Lord,” the man said, “if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean.”

He not only heard what Jesus said; he was moved to approach Him. He was aware of his mess and brought it to Jesus.

1. BRING YOUR MESS TO JESUS

Some problems are so obvious you don't need to be an expert to see them. You may not know a lot about cars or engines, but if a friend popped the hood and you saw this [slide: snake] you'd say, "Well there's your problem. You have a gigantic snake in your engine." You may not understand the complex issues involved in public education, but if you drove past this sign [slide: sign], you'd say, "Well there's your problem... literacy is misspelled." And for you computers may be a mystery, but even if you don't have a degree in electrical engineering you can look at this [slide: mouse] and say, "Well there's your problem. Dead mouse in the computer. That's also why the cat has been hovering for a week." Some problems are incredibly obvious.

This man coming to Jesus had an obvious problem. It was literally all over him. It was a lot more shocking than a fried mouse. He had a skin disease called leprosy and this meant he had boils and sores all over his body.

He also had shame—not just from the disfigurement of the leprosy—but from his contagiousness. The law required people with leprosy to keep at least 6 feet away from everyone else (unless it was windy, then 150 ft. away) and shout the word, ‘unclean’ when they came near others. People reacted to lepers like they would to dead bodies, with repulsion and fear. Talk about awareness. This man spent every waking minute aware that he was a complete and utter mess—and that he couldn’t do anything about it. And so he takes a risk: he approaches Jesus (a very bold thing to do—he could have been immediately stoned) and asks for help saying, ***“If you are willing... you can make me clean.”***

Now here is what I want you to think about. Jesus has just described what a blessed life looks like and then diagnosed the reason why we miss out on this life: namely, our own messed up hearts. Matthew immediately in chapter 8 records a person coming up and asking for help... the man with the skin-level problem. The one who was aware. We tend to not recognize or deal with problems till they hit the surface, but Jesus can see right to our core issues. For Jesus the human problem is obvious. He looks right at our hearts and says, ***“Well, there’s your problem. You’re heart keeps sabotaging your life.”*** The Bible teaches we have a fallen nature and our hearts are sinful, we miss God’s mark. But sometimes we don’t see it, because the problem is under our skin.

Studies back up the fact that our hearts tend to steer us wrong. Dr. Dan Gilbert is a psychology professor at Harvard who studies happiness and has concluded that human beings are horrible at choosing their way to happiness, mostly because the choices we make are so non-rational. Whenever we try to go after some good things, we are horrible at estimating our

chances of getting it and even worse at estimated the happiness it will bring. So often we just wing it. He says this,

“Research suggests that people are typically unaware of the reasons why they are doing what they are doing, but when asked for a reason, they readily supply one.”

Wow. Except when you're a kid, right? When a kid is caught doing something foolish, and you ask them, what were you thinking? What's the answer? “I don't know!” They aren't being evasive—just honest! It's the adults that make up the reasons! Dr. Gilbert goes on to say this: “What's so curious about human beings is that we can look deeply into the future, foresee disaster, and still do nothing in the present to stop it. The majority of people on this planet, they're overwhelmed with concerns about their immediate well being.” Culture may tell us to follow our hearts, but Dan Gilbert says that's like following a blind guide. Our hearts are sinful and lead us astray. So it's imperative we bring our mess to Jesus and let Him sort it out. We need a redeemed life.

Psalm 139:23-24 (New Living Translation): 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.

This is a prayer for awareness. It's how you set aside the sin, shame and self-reliance that stands between you and God. This is how you do what the leper did. You pray to God, “Search me. Show me what's under the cushions in my life. Help me become aware of the junk that's collected in my heart and steers me wrong. Show me what it is that's messing up my life.”

It could be that hurt from your life has caused you to pull back from other people and put up a protective layer around your heart. You don't get hurt as much, but you also miss the joy of opening your heart to others. Maybe in a culture that is driven so much by beauty, you've become too attached to looking desirable, or jealous of someone who may be more attractive. Maybe you find yourself flirting inappropriately to prove your attractiveness. Or you're too distraught over healthy signs of aging. Perhaps there are sexual mistakes and pasts that fill your heart with guilt or regret. In my own life I find that too often what impacts my decisions is just old fashioned selfishness. When we begin to pray, God search me, show me how I can be the person you really desire me to be? We take a huge step toward awareness. Awareness begins by discovering your mess, but ends by discovering God's Love. So present your mess to Jesus, and then...

2. REALIZE JESUS IS WILLING

One of the most damaging things people carry around in their heart is the idea that God is mad at them. The image they have is a bit like this: [slide: far side smite]. God's finger is poised above the smite button. He's just waiting for you to walk under the right piano and then bam! You get what you deserve. Or some people think God doesn't care at all. Look at the news and see all the heartbreaking things that happen. Look at your own life, your own history. We easily get the picture that God is either insane or indifferent. But the Bible says if you want to know what God is like, you need to look at the picture He gave us: the life of Jesus. There we see God's reaction when an unclean leper runs up to Him.

Matthew 8:2-3 (New Living Translation): “Lord,” the man said, “if you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean.” Jesus reached out and touched him. “I am willing,” he said. “Be healed!” And instantly the leprosy disappeared.

First off, Jesus is not indifferent. He doesn't ignore the man. Secondly he's not hostile. It would have been perfectly normal for him to pick up a rock and throw it at the leper for running up to him like that. Instead, Jesus does something shocking: he touches the leper. Jesus did many miracles where He did not touch people. Some He even did miles away, but not with this man. This man He touched. A huge gasp had to roll through the crowd, “A holy man touching an unclean, infectious leper?” And I can only imagine what it meant to the man; there's a good chance he hadn't been touched for years by another human. So what is God like? He touches the untouchable. He meets their deepest hurts with the touch of love. In a parallel account of this story in Mark it says that Jesus was, “moved with compassion” when he saw the man. This is a phrase that can almost mean He felt “slugged in the gut” by the man's situation. This phrase occurs 12 times in the NT—and 11 of those instances it refers directly to Jesus's reaction to people who were lost. Lost in grief, lost in sickness, lost in hopelessness and a lack of direction. He felt compassion for the man kneeling before him. He didn't want to smite the person, just the disease.

And then look at what Jesus says: I am willing. If you've ever wondered if God is willing to set your heart right, here is your answer. ***“I am willing.”*** In fact, that word ‘willing’ can mean desire. God's desire is to help you in the most powerful way possible—not just to heal your problem, but to heal the source of all your problems—to give you a brand new heart.

Some of you have wondered if God is really for you. You wonder, can God really forgive me for all that I have done... Jesus says, "I am willing." Will God really help me face my addiction? Jesus says, I am willing. Is there hope for my marriage or my life. Jesus says, I am willing. Will I ever be able to forgive? Will I ever be able to trust again? Will I ever be able to overcome this fear? Will I ever be emotionally healthy? Jesus says, I am willing. He healed this leper and many people physically when he was on earth, but that isn't what He came to do. He came to give us new hearts that would point us toward God. He came to give us a new spirit, so that we could not only be fully healed, but also become a source of healing for others. He desires to heal us from the inside out. The only question is this: are you willing to let Him? Are you willing to say, "Lord, will you make me clean? Will you give me a new heart and new spirit?" If you ask, He is willing. Awareness begins by discovering your mess, but ends by discovering God's Love. And then we need to...

3. WALK IN FREEDOM

Matthew 8:4 (New Living Translation): Then Jesus said to him, "Don't tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed."

So instantly the leprosy disappears. This guy's huge gamble has paid off in the biggest way he could imagine. He can barely contain his excitement. For the first time in a long time this guy can talk to people. He can hug them. Shake their hand. The world has just opened back up. He tells him to go to the priest and do what's required by the law so he can be fully allowed back

into society. He could now walk in freedom.

In our lives, we bring our mess to Jesus, we realize that Jesus is willing to heal, forgive and help, and then we are empowered to walk in this freedom.

We begin to walk in that freedom by placing our faith and our trust in Christ.

We start taking next steps, like baptism. Baptism is a powerful spiritual marker for our lives where we go underwater and emerge back up to show our union with Jesus, who died for us and was buried and rose again. Maybe for some of you, this is a important next step in the walk of freedom. On October 4th & 5th, across all our campuses, you can get baptized following the service. We'll continue our Freeway teaching, and all our other events, but water will be available for those who want to follow Christ and take this step of obedience.

We walk in freedom by walking with others. Freeway is such an awesome time to grow in our faith and to do the journey with others. This week there are groups meeting all over. Commit to next 6 weeks. Join a group. First step / Second step.

I came across a moving story this week about a woman named Amanda who was born with Spina Bifida. This is a condition where certain nerves are missing from the spine and one result is that your legs are underdeveloped. In Amanda's case, she could walk, but her legs were misshapen and her feet were two different sizes. She writes, "As a little girl, I was happy, but when I heard the verse found in Psalm 139, "...for I am fearfully and wonderfully made..." I believed that I was some odd exception to that rule. Surely

a loving God wouldn't have purposely made me like this." Even as an adult she struggled with feelings of shame over her appearance. At a wedding she decided to wear a skirt despite being self-conscious of her condition. She said she felt pretty, but at the reception a woman starting staring openly and unabashedly at her legs in disgust. Amanda says it's this kind of reaction that always makes her want to hide. It makes her think the lower half of her body cancels out any beauty in the top half. It makes her fear she will always be underestimated, misunderstood and never deeply known or loved. But listen to how she ends this story...

"I have decided that I'm going to be beautiful. Not the kind of beautiful that is loud and proud and in your face. I am going to be the kind of beautiful that is steady and understated—gentle and quiet, but strong. ...It's based on the knowledge that I have been intricately designed by the same artist who painted the trees and the flowers and the mountains and the oceans and the skies. I am even more breathtakingly beautiful than the physical world because unlike those mere things, I was created in the image of God himself. ...I'm OK with not knowing why things happen the way they do, with not knowing exactly why I was created the way I was created. I am OK with it because I have faith in someone who is astoundingly bigger and greater than myself. I am deeply and truly known by the one who created me. And I have a relationship with Jesus – someone who flipped everything upside down and caused a lot of ruckus. He declared that the weak are strong. The kingdom of God belongs to the least of these: the broken, the sick, the poor, the lonely. I can't help but be totally enamored and thrilled by that knowledge."

Amanda says next time she wears a skirt and someone stares at her legs she's going to say, "they're really great, right?" Someday God will give her new legs. In the meantime He has given her a new heart—one that is known and loved and courageous. If that's not beautiful, I don't know what is.

Amanda has found what we were all made for: to be fully known and fully loved. To have hearts so full of God we're okay with being a mess, because we're God's mess. He loves us as we are and wants to love us into what we're meant to be. And He can do it, if only we bring our mess to Jesus, ask for help and walk in freedom. It starts with awareness of our hurts and faults, but ends in an awareness of His love and acceptance. That's a journey I want us all to go on. That's what Freeway is all about. And it's a journey some need to start today...