

Freeway

Part One: *God's Heart for You*

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Text: Luke 15

Outline:

1. Freedom happens when you:
 - a. come to your senses.
 - b. take steps to return to God.
 - c. reject a negative view of God.
 - d. receive and celebrate all the goodness that God has for you.
2. God's love is unconditional. He's for you and committed to transforming you.

Message

I'm excited to start this new series called FREEWAY. If you are new today, we always insert an outline for the message so you can take notes. So go ahead and pull that out. We also have a mobile app that you can download to your phone with the notes. Just go to Google PLAY or iTunes and search for Cedarbrook Connect, then download the app.

I'm excited about this series because I think God will use it to help many of us find freedom. You know...it's so easy to get on the wrong track in life. Too often what started out as LIFE IN THE FAST LANE turned into the HIGHWAY TO HELL, right? Some of you know what I'm talking about. A few bad choices put you in a world of hurt, and now you fear you may be stuck there forever.

Thankfully, God often uses our pain to show us a way of escape. And that's what FREEWAY is about. It's about God helping us find the freedom we've been looking for: freedom from hurts and freedom from the bad choices that have set us back.

There are a lot of resources to supplement this series:

- You can sign up for a 40 day devotional that will be emailed to you every day.
- There are brief videos that discuss the lesson each week.
- And we have a number of Cedarbrook Circles you can join to discuss the lessons.

It's not too late to sign up. There is a catalog at the info desk or online. Plus you can find all these resources on our Facebook page or our website at cedarbrookchurch.net/freedom.

There are six principles that we'll be learning about in the coming weeks, but today I want to start with an introduction to this series by helping us understand a little bit about God's heart for us. You see, before we start a spiritual journey like this, it's important that we know the heart of God so we can trust that where we are headed is a good place.

Jesus helped us to understand God's heart by telling a story found in the book of Luke. Luke was a follower of Jesus who recorded much of Jesus' life and teaching. So in chapter fifteen of his book he recounts a day when Jesus was teaching at the home of a religious man. Don't think "dining room." It was more like a backyard barbeque with a hundred people. And then it says:

All the tax collectors and sinners came to listen to Jesus. Luke 15:1

These guys basically crashed the party.

Now, sinners weren't necessarily immoral people who did bad things. Sinners were the people that the religious people thought were unworthy of God. For example it mentions tax-collectors. In their mind, ALL tax-collectors were sinners. All shepherds were also in that group, as well as all poor people.

But sinners liked listening to Jesus so they crashed the party and Jesus welcomed them. That's why it says:

...the Pharisees and the scribes complained, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Luke 15:2

Pharisees and scribes were the religious experts of the day. They didn't like that Jesus welcomed sinners. He probably greeted them with a hug and a kiss. And then he ate with them. *Have the bagels. They're amazing!* You see...to eat a meal with someone in the Middle East symbolized that you accepted them like family.

Well, this upset the religious experts. It was undignified for a man of God to mingle with these people, let alone eat with them. If he really was a prophet he should know better. So they doubted that Jesus was sent from God.

Jesus must have sighed hearing these religious people complain because they didn't know God's heart. So he tells them a little story to help them understand God's love for sinners. You've probably heard the story: It's called the story of the Prodigal Son.

Then Jesus said, "A man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the property.' So the father divided his property between his two sons. "After a few days, the younger son gathered his possessions and left for a country far away from home. There he wasted everything he had on a wild lifestyle. Luke 15:11-13

Don't raise your hand, but has anyone here ever wasted everything on a wild lifestyle, or at least wasted a lot? I'm guessing many of us have.

Now, I need to unpack the context of this story for us to fully appreciate it. The younger son was like a lot of people. He was sick of living in his small town. I've heard people complain about Menomonie in this way. Get me out of here! Well, at least my three kids all said this. The boy was sick of working for his dad and his older brother. He felt trapped. His only hope was that his dad would die so he could get his inheritance and move away. But that probably wasn't going to happen, so he did something that no Middle East boy would do: he asked for his inheritance.

Now, sons today probably ask for their inheritance all the time. But in that culture it was highly insulting for a couple of reasons. First, people got an inheritance after they helped their dad with the family farm or business for their entire life. But this kid wanted his money without working for it.

The second reason it was offensive is because it was the equivalent of telling his dad he wished he was dead.

Now, Jesus didn't say anything about the dad being insulted in the story, but we know that the townspeople would have been insulted on his behalf. In fact, they would have been irate, completely disgusted by the boy's disrespectful behavior. He would have been the talk of the town...and it wouldn't be good talk. They'd be calling him all kinds of "good for nothing" type names.

In fact, there was a custom that when a child wasted his inheritance, the townspeople would gather rocks in vases, surround the child's house and then break the vases on the ground as a way of symbolizing that he was cut off from the life of the community.

So, I want you to grasp the hatred that this community had for that boy. It's crucial to understanding this story. Not only did the boy ask for his inheritance, but he wasted it on a wild lifestyle: two cultural no-nos. This is the kind of offense that people would say was unforgiveable. I wonder if you've ever done anything that you thought was unforgiveable.

Let's see what happened next:

He had nothing left when a severe famine spread throughout that country. He had nothing to live on. So he got a job from someone in that country and was sent to feed pigs in the fields. No one in the country would give him any food, and he was so hungry that he would have eaten what the pigs were eating. "Finally, he came to his senses. Luke 15:15-17

Jesus crafted a story where the main character was the worst of the worst. And that was intentional. Jesus wanted to answer the question: *What is God's heart for the worst of the worst sinner?* Not only did he do the most offensive thing possible in that culture, insult his dad...he landed the most offensive job...feeding pigs. Pigs were considered unclean animals to Jews.

Now, the religious people must have liked hearing this part of the story because the sinner is reaping what he sowed. He's getting the judgment he deserved. They were thinking: Maybe this Jesus isn't such a bad guy after all. Some of them were probably pointing to the sinners in the crowd and telling them to "Listen up" because Jesus was talking to them.

The sinners, meanwhile, were probably wondering where this story was going. What was Jesus saying? Was there any hope for this boy? Because if there was no hope for him, there was no hope for them.

Jesus said this boy came to his senses. That's the first step to finding freedom. Isn't that the way it is at first: we lose our senses? Everyone around us can see what we can't see. They can see that we have an addiction; we think we just like to party a little too much. They can see that we are in an unhealthy relationship, but we think God wants us to be happy and this person makes us happy. They think our finances are out of control, but we assume it will all work out in the end. We feel a hot streak coming on and think a trip to the casino will solve our problems.

But then what happens? ...the bottom falls out on us; we reap what we sow, and finally, we come to our senses. Maybe that's why some of you came here today. You've come to your senses. You realize that the life you've been living isn't working and you are looking for some answers...for some freedom.

The boy starts to think about what he can do:

He said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more food than they can eat, while I'm starving to death here? I'll go at once to my father, and I'll say to him, "Father, I've sinned against heaven and you. I don't deserve to be called your son anymore. Make me one of your hired men."' "So he went at once to his father. Luke 15:17-20

This tells us that the boy didn't know his father's heart. He didn't think his dad would take him back unless he worked for him. He had to pay for his sins if he had any chance of returning, but even then he assumed He would never be in the good graces of his Father. He'd always be a servant: never a son.

Sadly, this is how many of us view God too. Jesus wanted his listeners to see that when we make a mess of our lives, too often we think all we can hope for is God's mercy. We don't expect anything good from God because we assume we've burned our bridges with him. He doesn't want to have anything to do with us. So we come to church on Sunday, or pray now and then, not really having any assurance that God accepts us. In our minds, we are always a servant and never a son or a daughter.

Well, the boy may not have understood his father's heart but he did take steps to return home and that's our second step in finding freedom: Turn to God. Now, the story takes a jaw-dropping turn:

While he was still at a distance, his father saw him and felt compassion for him. He ran to his son, put his arms around him, and kissed him. Luke 15:20

Men in the Middle East didn't run...it's still true today. It's undignified. So, if men didn't run, then why did Jesus have this man running in his story? Why didn't the father just wait for his son to arrive home?

It's not obvious to us, but it would have been obvious to Jesus' audience that day. The reason he ran and put his arms around his son is because if he didn't, the townspeople would have gotten to him first. When someone spotted him, word would travel fast and they would all meet him at the

city gate where they would have scolded him, beat him, and possibly stoned him to death. The father had to get ahead of the crowd in order to save him. So he ran.

The son started to deliver his apology:

Father, I've sinned against heaven and you. I don't deserve to be called your son anymore. Luke 15:21

That was true. He didn't deserve to be called his son. But love covers a multitude of sin, doesn't it? Just because you don't deserve something doesn't mean it won't be given to you. When you receive something you don't deserve, it's called GRACE.

The boy only gets half way through his apology when his dad interrupts him and says to his servants:

'Hurry! Bring out the best robe, and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let's celebrate with a feast My son was dead and has come back to life. He was lost but has been found.' Then they began to celebrate. Luke 15:22-24

His father – shockingly - treated him like royalty...like you'd treat a priest or a king. You see, the father wanted to outwardly demonstrate his heart towards his son so there was no doubt how he felt so the towns people would respect him. Jesus was explaining why he treats sinners like family. He loves them in spite of what they've done. And here are my third and fourth steps to freedom:

Freedom happens when you reject a negative view of God and
Then receive the goodness that God has for you.

Now, imagine the crowd listening to this story. How do you think they reacted? The sinners were probably cheering, right? The story ended the way they hoped it would. Jesus was like this Father. But the religious experts were undoubtedly livid. They felt tricked. This story didn't go where they thought it was going. There was no judgment. There was no rejection. And worse yet, they thought Jesus was sending the wrong message...that sin didn't matter...that you could live any kind of life you wanted and God just winks at it.

But they missed the point. Of course God cares about sin. Sin is what the first half of the story was about. Sin destroyed this boy's life. The fruit of sin is what made him come to his senses. It's what made him return home. He understood. He got the point: he reaped what he sowed.

So his dad didn't need to lay a guilt trip on him...because the consequences did that. That's why his dad was so happy, because the boy saw the light. He was back from the dead.

So this is what I want you to see at the beginning of this new series. Before you start this spiritual journey, you need to know that God is *for* you. He's not against you. He loves you, *unconditionally*. He's not looking to punish you, or shame you, for your past. It's just the opposite. He wants to honor you... not for your sin but for coming home. You see, your value to God isn't in what you've done. Your value to God is in who you are: his child, no matter what you've done.

So, as we get on this FREEWAY to freedom I want you to lift up your head. You'll never find freedom if your head is buried in regret. You need to know that your past is forgiven and your future is full of hope...IF... you keep in mind ...God's heart for you.

Prayer: Father, thank you for this story. Might the truth of it sink deep into our being so that we never doubt your love. Help us to live as sons and daughters and not as servants. Amen.

Going Deeper: Use the following questions for personal reflection and/or to discuss with family, friends or a group of friends. You can also watch this video to help aid your discussion: <https://vimeo.com/76554671>

1. What do you know about FREEWAY? What are your expectations? What do you hope to get out of this series?
2. Why did Remy want to start off this series with the story of the Prodigal Son?
3. Was there anything new that you learned from the telling of this story? What? Did it change your understanding of the story?
4. Read all of Luke 15 to get the context of the story. How do the stories of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin relate to the Prodigal Son?
5. In what ways have you rebelled and wasted your life? What were some of the bad choices you've made?
6. What made you come to your senses? Or...are there areas people are saying that you are currently off track?
7. Have you been able to recover from your bad choices? If so, how? If not, why might that be?
8. The religious people and the boy had a wrong view of God. What was that?
9. How did the father correct this view of God?
10. What are some "Keys" to finding freedom that you see in this story?