

FREEWAY

Part Two: *Awareness*

Text: Acts 22

Outline:

1. We all have issues: some known and some unknown to us.
 2. The opposite of awareness is denial.
 3. Defensive, Addictions, Intimidate, Rationalize, Lie, Minimize, Deflect, Spiritualize/Intellectualize, Blame, Over compensate, and many more!
 4. We deny our weaknesses because we fear losing love and/or respect.
 5. We become more aware when we:
 - a. Turn down the noise.
 - b. Drop our defenses and reflect.
 - c. Turn up the volume on God. (Psalm 139:23,24)
 - d. Lean into what we hear.
- a. Read Psalm 139:23,24 together. Ask God to work in all of you over the next six weeks to be more aware and invite him to do his work in you.

Message

Welcome to FREEWAY. Last week I started with an introduction, but today I am officially starting the six lessons that I hope will lead us all to a new level of freedom.

If you are new here today I want to invite you to pull out the notes to track with me. You can also get the notes on our Mobile app, called Cedarbrook Connect. Last week some people said they couldn't download it. Keep trying. Our wi-fi signal cuts in and out. On the backside of the notes are discussion questions for you to process the sermon.

What excites me about this series is that it offers people a PROCESS to find freedom. I don't think everyone understands that there's a process to tackle their problems. Some people just think if they show up at church, or visit with a counselor, or read a self-help book that something magical will happen...that suddenly they'll be a better person.

And then, when nothing magical happens they give up. Either they suffer through their problems, hide their problems, or they ignore their problems hoping they'll go away.

And that's too bad because problems don't magically disappear. They require that you enter into a methodical process to overcome them. It's like a project I've been working on in my yard. After years of not liking my narrow, cracked, and off-center sidewalk, plus my ugly shrubs, I tore them both out and now I'm in the process of renovating all of that.

It's not a quick fix. There are about twenty different steps to rejuvenate my front yard. I had to tear out the shrubs and then the concrete. Some guys helped me remove the concrete and then set a form for new concrete. It's taking way longer than I want it to but if I follow the process I'll eventually have a nice looking front yard.

And it's the same way with us. If we want to make a change for the better, it's a process. So I hope you will make it a point to either be here each Sunday, or listen to the podcast if you miss it, because each week builds on the previous week.

You know, some of us have promised ourselves and others, for years, that we'll change. That we'll work on a problem and maybe even get some counseling, but we've never done it. Well, this is your chance. I'm going to walk us through a six week biblical process to make the change other people have been praying you'd make!

Awareness Leads to Freedom

Let's start by looking at the first step to freedom and that is awareness. Change starts when you first become AWARE that things aren't the way they should be. It's like those ugly shrubs of mine. Lisa used to casually mention that maybe we could get rid of them, but I never took her seriously because it seemed too hard. It would take too much effort. But then a friend of mine suggested the same thing. Lisa made me aware of the problem. But when my friend validated Lisa's opinion, I became fully aware. Suddenly it was on my radar and I finally wanted to do something about it. (Plus he offered a tractor to pull out the shrubs!)

My guess is you are in the same situation. One or two people have mentioned an issue that they think you have but you haven't taken them seriously. Maybe it seems too hard to make the change. You are SOMEWHAT aware but not aware enough to do anything about it.

Well, I've got some bad news. It's worse than you think! Not only do you have the problems that you are mildly aware of. You've got problems that you are totally UNaware of.

For example, some of you dominate conversations and you don't even know it because people are too nice to tell you. But your friends all know. Others of you don't see how defensive you get when people point out a mistake.

Some of you don't have a good sense of people's personal boundaries and you make them uncomfortable, but you aren't aware how inappropriate you are. In other words the truth about us all, is that we don't really KNOW the truth about who we are.

Let's look at this grid (Google "Johari Window" to see this graphic). It compares what we know about ourselves to what others know about us. There are some problems that we have and we know it and others know it too. That's what's KNOWN. For example, I can be so focused on solving a problem that I'm not very sensitive to people around me. I'm all business and it rubs people the wrong way. Anyone who knows me has seen this. It's no secret. I know it and they know. There's no excuse for it. It's a problem I'm working on...constantly.

But there are some problems that I have that no one knows about but me. They are HIDDEN. For example...well, they're hidden so I'm not telling you!

Then there are issues that you know I have, but I don't. That's called a BLIND SPOT. And then finally, there are issues that I have that I'm unaware of, but so are you. That box is UNKNOWN. It's like the mystery box. Maybe Pandora's Box! Who knows what evil lurks there!?

My point here is that we all have issues: some known and some unknown. So, what we need is awareness. Awareness is when the unknown becomes known. It suddenly comes on our radar. I saw a perfect example of this the other night when I was watching an old rerun of "Friends." (Season One, Episode Five).

If you don't know Monica, she's a neat freak...on steroids...like, obsessive-compulsive neat freak. So, one day she comes home and Rachel has just cleaned the apartment and she made the mistake of moving a piece of furniture in their apartment. So let's watch how Monica reacts. (Monica's friend tease her about being OCD. She says she is just organized and responsible. They keep pressing her and she finally realizes that she's just like her mother.)

This is funny because it's so true. We've all been there. We've all defended ourselves until suddenly we see something we've never seen about ourselves. How many of you have ever said:

I'm my dad. My dad's name was Fritz and whenever I'm acting like my dad – which is overbearing and bossy - my sister rolls her eyes and says, "Okay Fritz." Now, You can't say that! Only my sister can say that!

When I was younger I had all kinds of justification and excuses for my behavior, just like Monica. But I had to finally own it and say, *That's true. I do those things and there's no excuse for it. I need to change that.*

We can see this same unawareness in people in the Bible. There's a famous story about how Paul came to faith in Jesus. In the notes it references Acts 9. But the story is told in Acts 22 with a little more detail:

I am a Jew, ...I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished. Acts 22:3-5

Paul said that he was zealous for God and he showed his zeal by killing Christians. He was proud of it. He was good at it too. He would track them down like a bounty hunter.

But Paul's zeal for God blinded him to the fact that he was a murderer. Imagine that: he was killing people and justifying it in his mind as good...even godly. So God needed to bring some awareness to Paul:

About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' " 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. " 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. " 'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. " 'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' Acts 22:6-10

Paul suddenly became aware of something that he had never seen before and that was the start of him finding, not only freedom, but God's purpose for his life.

You see, Paul was smart. I love his response here. He didn't question God. He didn't defend or justify his behavior. He just said, "What should I do?" You see, he was open to admitting his problem and changing his behavior, which ultimately led to him finding freedom.

Denial is the Opposite of Awareness

But some of us aren't as insightful and responsive as Paul. When we become aware of our dark side sometimes we work hard to ignore it, or cover it up. That's called denial. Denial is the opposite of awareness. Denial says: I don't want to think about my problems. I don't want to deal with them.

Now, I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this but let me give you ten quick examples of denial. I'll pose them as questions. See if any of these look familiar.

1. *Are you defensive?* This is when you are sensitive to even the slightest question or criticism. You immediately push back and defend yourself or attack the other person.
2. *Do you have any addictions?* It doesn't matter what the addiction is: drugs, alcohol, video games, work, pornography, exercise...they all work to numb us from what we don't want to face.
3. *Do you intimidate people?* Intimidators make you feel like you need to walk on eggshells. They purposefully push you away because they don't want people to see who they really are.
4. *Do you rationalize your behavior?* I think everyone is an expert at rationalizing. I know I am. This is when you justify and excuse wrong behavior rather than take responsibility for it.
5. *Do you feel the need to lie?* Sometimes people are so desperate to cover up their problems that they just fabricate a story so no one knows the truth about them.
6. *Do you minimize your behavior?* This is when you make light of your problem. You might joke about it, or say it's not a big deal. Everyone does this. You might criticize people for overreacting and tell them to "get over it."
7. *Do you deflect personal comments?* Deflection is when people try to talk to you about something and you redirect the conversation.
8. *Do you spiritualize or intellectualize your problems?* Some people deny their problems by quoting Bible verses or some complex theory. They've got it all worked out in their mind why their problem isn't really a problem. In the story about Paul, I'm sure he

spiritualized why killing Christians was a good thing. He probably had Bible verses to back it up.

9. *Do you blame others for your problems?* When you blame others you don't have to take responsibility for your behavior.
10. *Do you over compensate?* You hope that if you work hard at being good in one area that people won't want to bring up your weaknesses.

These are just a few tactics we use. There are many more. But we all have our specialties: our "go to" methods to keep other people from seeing who we really are.

You see, the reason we work so hard at denial is because we fear our weaknesses being exposed, right? We fear that if people see who we really are that either they won't love us or they won't respect us. Or both...and we can't handle the pain of rejection.

Thankfully Jesus knows us and loves us: warts and all. He knows our pain and he knows how we try to cover it up. And he loves us anyways. He loves us just the way we are, but he loves us so much he doesn't want us to stay that way. He wants us to find freedom.

In the FREEWAY workbook it says:

Jesus was there when our dad left our mom for another woman and understands why we give our hearts to strangers in bars who tell us we're pretty. Jesus cried with us when the coach humiliated us on the practice field, and he knows what it felt like when we were the last one picked for the kickball team. Jesus gets why we drown our sorrows in three bottles of cheap Merlot and why we eat large amounts of Rocky Road ice cream when we're lonely...he has been there and he wants to do something about it. Page 50

How to Become More Aware

So how do you become aware? Let me list out a few ideas here. First, **Turn down the noise.** Awareness increases as noise decreases. One of the ways we stay in denial is by turning up both the speed and the volume of our lives.

Everyone I know is too busy. They all have more things to do than they have time to do them. But some of that busyness is self-imposed. You don't have to reply to every email you get or check your phone or FB status so much. You don't have to attend every event you are invited to or binge watch your favorite TV show.

But some of us like that. Some of us keep busy on purpose. It keeps our minds off ourselves and off our problems. But if you want to be more aware, turn down the noise.

I'm getting better at this myself. I used to always listen to a podcast when I exercised but I quit that because I realized I was filling up all my free brain space with other people's thoughts. I was over-efficient, thinking that I needed to maximize every free moment to be learning something new. But I realized that I need to give myself some space to reflect on the information I already had in my brain. My exercise time is a good time to "turn down the noise" but I was only adding

to the noise: missing the opportunity. So, think of just one thing you can do this week to turn down the noise in your life.

The second thing you can do to increase your awareness is: **Drop your defenses and reflect.** Defensiveness is rooted in fear. It's the fear of being misunderstood and judged. It's the fear of rejection. So you push back and defend yourself before someone can make you look bad.

But instead of pushing back, why not use that moment as a chance to become aware? Why not drop your defensiveness and explore your feelings? Ask yourself:

Why am I afraid?

What am I afraid will happen if I'm found to have a fault?

Why don't I want this person to see that I have a problem?

A few years back Lisa came into our kitchen and asked me a simple question. I don't remember the question but I remember getting defensive. I pushed back in some way. Normally that would shut her down and she would just walk away. We'd usually talk about it a few days later. But for some reason she had the wisdom to ask me a follow up question. She said: Remy, I don't understand. I just asked you a simple question because I didn't know. Why did you get defensive? I don't have any agenda.

I took a few seconds, collected my thoughts and said: I got defensive because I didn't hear you ask me an innocent question. I heard my dad criticizing me with a rhetorical question, because that's what he did. That revelation explained a lot about the tension in our marriage. I still catch myself hearing criticism when Lisa asks me a question. Being able to catch yourself in a vulnerable moment and ask yourself these questions is crucial to your becoming aware.

The third way to become aware is to **Turn up the volume on God.** God knows all about you and he's happy to show you what you need to see, just like he did with Paul. Here's a prayer from the Bible that might help you:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Psalm 139:23,24

God wants you to become the person he made you to be. He's happy to not only show you where you are off track but he'll help you get back on the right track. There's no shame here. You never have to fear what God will do when you pray a prayer like this. Only good things will come from a pray like this.

Once you pray this prayer, then pay attention to what God shows you.

- He might speak to you through a friend, or a family member, or even your boss.
- He might speak to you through a song, or a TV show, or an article.
- He might even speak to you through a sermon!

God is faithful to show you what you need to see. You just have to be willing to see what he shows you.

And that leads me to my last point: **Lean into what you hear**. The temptation is to revert back to denial. To run from what you see. But that will only keep you from the freedom you are looking for.

Well, that's enough to get you started. My simple point is: *awareness is the first step to freedom*.

Let me show you where I'm at with my front yard. Just a reminder, this is what it looked like before. And now, I'm almost done. A few more touches today and then I need to get some new shrubs.

You know, looking back, I don't know what took me so long to make the change. I guess it didn't seem that bad at the time. But when you compare what was to what I have now, the improvement is obvious. It was worth all the work I put into it.

I think that's what you'll say if you allow the change process to happen in your life. It was worth it. Why did I wait so long? So come back next week and let's work on this together.

Prayer: Jesus, you confronted Paul and he immediately laid himself open to you. Then he went on to become the greatest spokesperson for Jesus. Speak to us in the same way and might we have the same willing heart that is eager to hear and eager to respond. Change us into your image. Use us to make your name great. Amen.

Going Deeper: use the follow questions for personal reflection and/or to discuss with your friends and family or in your FREEWAY Circle.

1. Watch the eight-minute video at potsc.com/video call "Awareness."
2. Tell of a time when you thought you were doing something good and then found out it was actually bad for you (like Mike's sandwich).
 - a. How does the idea of becoming more aware feel? Is it scary? Exciting? Other?
3. Read Acts 9 about Paul's conversion.
 - a. How could Paul have been so unaware?
 - b. What caused him to be closed minded?
 - c. What were some key factors in him becoming aware? *In the very next chapter, Peter becomes aware of something in his life too. Read about that outside of your circle.*
4. Why is it so hard to be fully self-aware? What keeps you from being aware?
5. How would your life be different if you were more aware?
6. Remy gave us ten examples of denial. What were they?
 - a. Which ones could you identify with the most?
 - b. Can you think of other examples?
7. Review the steps to becoming aware:
 - a. What are the biggest distractions in your life? How attached are you to your smartphone? Facebook? Video games? TV shows? Working late? Other? How can you turn down the noise? Do these things mask your awareness?

- b. On a scale of 1-10, how defensive are you when confronted with your weaknesses? Why is that? What is the fear?
- c. How can you turn up the volume on God? That is, how can you be more purposeful in becoming aware of areas you need to grow?