

Masterclass – Freedom

Luke 12:13-21 (NIV)

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." ¹⁴ Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" ¹⁵ Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

¹⁶ And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

¹⁸ "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' ²¹ "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

(William Wallace: Little that is known of William Wallace outside of a two year military campaign in which he defeated a much larger force of English at the battle of Stirling Bridge and in September 1297 and was eventually defeated by an even larger English army at the battle of Falkirk in July 1298. He evaded the English for seven years until he was turned in by a Scottish knight seeking to curry favour with the English King Edward 1, who had William slowly tortured to death as a lesson to others who might seek to defy the English crown)

Would you be willing' to trade ALL the days, from this day to that, for one chance, just one chance, to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives, but they'll never take... OUR FREEDOM!

– William Wallace (From the movie Braveheart)

There is a sense where this Braveheart quote makes little sense, William Wallace was far from free, he lived under the rule of an English king he despised, who would eventually overwhelm his Scottish army with sheer numbers, hunt him down, torture and kill him. William Wallace was really not free economically, politically or in the end physically. But at a spiritual level there is something going on here. You cannot watch the Braveheart movie without feeling that the William Wallace character is enunciating for us a state of freedom that has nothing to do with economics or politics or physical freedom but is something essential to the human spirit and this morning I want to challenge us all – How free are you? Jesus said that if he sets us free we are free indeed (John 8:36).

Today's masterclass transitions from Jesus teaching his disciples to Jesus teaching members of a very unruly crowd who were literally trampling over one another to get the best spot (Luke 12:1). Jesus had been teaching his disciples some interesting stuff about integrity when a member of the crowd came forward and got in Jesus face demanding:

"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." (Luke 12:13)

For Hebrews, land inheritance was generally a double portion to the oldest son and single portions to the other sons, but in reality fathers had a lot of discretion when it came to doling out of the property (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). So if papa was out of sorts with youngest son it wasn't unheard of that he would give all of the inheritance to the eldest son, which is probably what has happened in this passage. The man getting in Jesus' face is most likely a younger son who has not been given any portion of the inheritance, something which the Law of Moses says shouldn't happen. This is why the man comes to Jesus, calls him rabbi, because he is asking Jesus to make a ruling on Moses' law.

So Jesus looks over at this man and his brother. They are both there in the crowd and neither are very happy with each other. Anger and frustration would be tying their faces up in knots. The youngest son has most likely demanded a proportion of the inheritance from his brother but for whatever reason they have a bad relationship and the eldest son refuses to give him anything, probably citing the wishes of their father. The youngest son has become furious at being denied and he is going to fight this all the way. Right around the world this very scenario is played out in family law courts every day. My mum was a family law court mediator and her role was to try to mediate between two people who were generally mad at each other and completely fixated on winning. Mum learnt to tell in about the first minute of meeting the couple whether there was any chance at mediation.

In the same way Jesus looks at these two guys and instantly recognises that there is a wall between them that is not going to come down. They are going to fight and argue 'til the cows come home because the only thing they are interested in is winning. So Jesus doesn't see any point in getting into their fight:

Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" (Luke 12:14)

What Jesus will do is push past the presenting problem, which is the dispute about inheritance, in order to get to the core problem, which is their spiritual condition.

Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." (Luke 12:15)

The Greek word for greed means something like hunger, because it is a powerful controlling force in the life of these brothers. These brothers are not free, they are not free to live. Every day they will wake up in slavery to anger. Any joy that might come their way will be sucked out by feelings of resentment and self-pity but this is not the way we were designed to live.

In Genesis 2 God describes the design. We were created in love, we are totally the children of God, he loved the fact that he had created us and he declared we were good. He breathed into us his own creativity. God created us capable of enjoying life, being amazed and awed by what we see, loving what we smell and eat. We were created to care for the environment in which we lived. We were created to be free in

our living. Created interdependent with our creator and with each other and we were created gentle, we could be naked and no one was going to be bothered.

Designed by God to be

- Loved Creation (Genesis 1:31, 2:7)
- Creative (Genesis 1:26-27)
- Enjoying (Genesis 2:9)
- Caring (Genesis 2:15)
- Free (Genesis 2:16-17)
- Interdependent (Genesis 2:18-24)
- Gentle (Genesis 2:25)

I don't know about you but the Genesis story touches something deeply in me. When I drink in the description of the life God wants for us, I yearn to be truly alive like that, to be truly free. To get a handle on that kind of freedom we need to understand how we lose it and there in the middle of the Genesis story is a clear explanation.

¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is simply independence – We teach our children the difference between right and wrong so that they will become independent moral agents - so to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is simply to choose to live independently, which on the surface sounds totally fine, it sounds grown-up, until you begin to consider that we were created for interdependence with God and with each other. This is the point Jesus is making with the parable he tells the two brothers. It is a parable about the most independent person in all of creation. As we read through this parable I want you to count the number of times the first person singular is used.

*¹⁶ And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. ¹⁷ **He** thought to **himself**, 'What shall **I** do? **I** have no place to store **my** crops.' ¹⁸ "Then **he** said, 'This is what **I'll** do. **I** will tear down **my** barns and build bigger ones, and there **I** will store all **my** grain and **my** goods. ¹⁹ And **I'll** say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" (Luke 12:16-19)*

How many times is the first person singular used? 13 times. How many times is the plural used? Not at all. This is a person who is as far from interdependence as you can get. The truly independent person cuts themselves off from God, from God's love, God's protection, God's guidance and God's healing, and then it can come as a bit of a shock to be confronted by all the pointless things we have done and all the life we have missed out on.

*²⁰ "But God said to him, '**You** fool! This very night **your** life will be demanded from **you**. Then who will get what **you** have prepared for **yourself**?' (Luke 12:20)*

We were not created to live independently, we were created to live interdependently. It is for this reason that we spend our whole lives seeking after friends and partners because that is the way we have been wired – interdependently. But even that hunger for relationship is just a shadow in comparison to our interdependence with God who is at the heart of our existence. As Augustine said;

“Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.” (Augustine, Confessions (Book 1))

Our souls were created to breathe in God in the same way that our lungs were created to breathe in air. Our lungs were created to breathe in a particular kind of air, 78% Nitrogen, 21% oxygen and less than 1% other gases. But if we didn't have access to air anymore we would breathe in anything we could lay our lungs on, 100% nitrogen, we would breathe that in and sound like chipmunks until we died. You see in struggling for life we know we have to breathe so we breathe in whatever is at hand but you see, spiritual freedom is breathing in the right air.

I was diving once and suddenly I was out of air. I remember the feeling of absolute panic that gripped me when I could not fill my lungs and I also remember the feeling of elation as I broke the surface of the water, spat out the regulator and breathed in that beautiful air, oh that's freedom, that's what my lungs were designed to do.

When Jesus looked at the two brothers fighting over the inheritance, he looked at two men who were breathing in the wrong air. They were breathing in substitute air that could never give them life.

This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:21)

Life is fully knowing at the deepest level of our being that we are the dearly loved children of God, and that is the measure of our value in this universe. Without that we turn to substitute ways to value our lives. The youngest brother thinks; well if I get this much land I know I'm worth at least this much, except that Jesus knows that when he gets that much land it will be the wrong air and it will not fill his lungs with the kind of significance he longs for but can only come from the love of God.

You may have been wondering what this heart with all the strings is all about, well this is our life, our heart tethered by substitute air, by substitute significance.

Substitute significance

- Possessions
- Achievements
- Status
- Pleasing others
- Sex
- Independence

This freedom – is what Jesus does.

17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:17-18)

The challenge this morning is a very simple question, are you free? Are you breathing in God's good air or are caught up with substitutes. The answer for everyone in this room and for everyone in this world should be yes, I am not yet completely free, but in Christ I am being transformed, I am growing more and more free every day.

This is even true of the most decorated Olympians of all time, Michael Phelps. It is not that long ago that Phelps' name was being dragged through the mud with a damaging photo of him smoking drugs through a bong and two DUI arrests. *"I was a train wreck,"* he told ESPN. *"I was like a time bomb, waiting to go off. I had no self-esteem, no self worth. There were times where I didn't want to be here. It was not good. I felt lost."*



Phelps decided to retire from the sport after London having won 18 gold medals, but underneath the surface were serious unresolved issues about the significance of his life. One of the biggest areas of struggle stemmed from his parents' divorce when Phelps was nine-years-old, and a "complicated" relationship with his father, Fred Phelps, a Maryland state trooper. *"I felt like he was abandoning me and I didn't put any energy into something I thought was a dead-end street,"* Phelps told ESPN.

Bob Bowman, Phelps's coach, became a father figure, but even he became disillusioned by Phelps's erratic behaviour. *"After the drug photo, Michael didn't trust anybody, except for me, his mom, and maybe a couple other people. He was wary of everything,"* Bowman said.

This was a young man burnt out because his spiritual resources were not up to the challenge of his life. With that burnt out feeling Michael wanted nothing more to do with swimming. *"I was finished; I was done,"* he told ESPN. But retirement brought a kind of freedom that was intoxicating at first. *"I gained 30 pounds. I probably had too much fun. Whatever I wanted to do, I did. I was a little twerp,"* he recounted.

Phelps approached Bowman about coming back for one last Olympics in Rio. *"No, I can't go through this again,"* Bowman told him. Phelps protested. *"No, I'll do it the right way,"* he assured his coach. But on September 30, 2014, Phelps left the Horseshoe Casino in Baltimore, where he had been drinking heavily, and foolishly got behind the wheel. Police pulled him over for going 81 in a 55 zone. A breathalyser test revealed a blood alcohol level that was nearly twice the legal limit. He was charged with a DUI, his second in 10 years.

Coach Bowman thought it was the last straw — his third strike — and that was it.

For the next week Phelps languished in his Baltimore home curled up in his bedroom, with thoughts of suicide careening through his mind. *"This is the end of my life... How many times will I mess up? Maybe the world would be better without me, people won't have to deal with what I put them through,"* he thought. Phelps isolated

himself, didn't eat, and rarely slept during his week of implosion, as he continued to be dogged by suicidal impulses.

But prompted by God, an unexpected rescue call came from a longtime friend, NFL star Ray Lewis, a strong Christian who had lived through his own dark time. Immediately, Lewis sensed the hopelessness and despair in Phelps. *"This is when we fight,"* Lewis told Phelps. *"This is when real character shows up. Don't shut down. If you shut down we all lose."*

Lewis proceeded to tell Phelps about his own dark days, *"some things that weren't pretty"* in his life, which is an understatement.

On the phone, Lewis convinced Phelps to seek help at the Meadows, a behavioral rehab facility outside Phoenix, according to ESPN. Phelps knew it was time for a change, but taking the next step was outside his comfort zone. *"I got into a car, shaking in the car, shaking when I got there. I was scared, afraid for the first time in my life. When you find your lowest point in your life, you're open to a lot of things to try and change that, to get back on the right path. I was just surrendering."*

Phelps entered rehab carrying a book Lewis gave him, *The Purpose Driven Life*, by Rick Warren. *"It's turned me into believing there is a power greater than myself and there is a purpose for me on this planet,"* Phelps told ESPN. After reading the book for a couple days, Phelps called Lewis. *"Man this book is crazy!"* he exclaimed. *"The thing that's going on...oh my gosh...my brain, I can't thank you freaking enough, man. You saved my life."* Lewis felt encouraged that Phelps was emerging from his suicidal despair. *"I could see he was coming out of it – he will make it. Then he started calling me with things he was reading and I thought, It's sinking in."*

Warren's book also convinced Phelps to reconcile with his father, because God's heart is always for reconciliation. In November 2014, Phelps left the Meadows rehab facility and resumed training for the Rio Olympics. Three months later he asked his long-time girlfriend, Nicole Johnson, to be his wife. On May 5th, 2016, Boomer Robert, their firstborn, came into the world. Recently he won a stack of Gold medals. Phelps is freer today than he has been for years, Jesus wants to do exactly the same thing for you.