

LIVING FREE – Week 7

Monday, July 19

When a challenge arises in life, why do some people rise to meet it and other people fold or quit? That was the question Carol Dweck decided she would study. She records her discoveries in a book entitled, *Mindset*. When we think of people and what they will do in life, we may think of giftedness or even IQ. But studies show that these factors are important, but not the most important. The title of Dweck's book gives it away. What she discovered is there are certain mindsets that open the way for growth and learning, and others that impede growth. That word growth is the key.

Here's what she says:

But doesn't our society value intelligence, personality and character. Isn't it normal to want these traits? Yes, but...there's another mindset in which these traits are not simply a hand you are dealt and have to live with, always trying to convince yourself and others that you have a royal flush when you're secretly worried it's a pair of tens. In this mindset, the hand you're dealt with is just the starting point for development. This growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts.

This person, as Dweck describes them, is less concerned about success and failure than about growing. This means that opportunities are not avoided because they are difficult and you just might fail. No, these opportunities you pursue because you know whether you succeed or fail, you are going to grow.

Now, here's our text for today:

Numbers 14:20-24

²⁰ Then the LORD said, "I have pardoned, according to your word. ²¹ But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, ²² none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, ²³ shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it. ²⁴ But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it.

Now, there is much that could be said about what scripture calls the spirit of Caleb. We are told it is different. How is it different? Let's back track a little here. Now, here was one of the problems of sending in the spies. They were the leaders from each of the tribes. They were already recognized stakeholders with status and place in the community. How might they see the risk of going into the land as they were measuring it? They had reputations to protect, positions to guard. Why would they want to risk a campaign that might lead to failure? That is another mindset that Dweck sees in her study. It is the success/fail mindset. The idea is that if we are not sure we will succeed, if there is any doubt that we would win, why would we risk what we have? Why would people already recognized as the best and the brightest choose a path that could, in their thinking, lead to failure? It just would not be worth the risk. Of course, they would say no. They would sway the crowd to follow them and to protect the status quo. This is the success/fail mindset that Dweck discovered hampers growth and learning. If we are worried about protecting status or reputation, we are not willing to step out in faith. We are not going to put everything on the line. In the end, this led Israel to disaster. As it turned out, avoiding failure led to the worst failure of all. The people remained in the wilderness until everyone but Joshua and Caleb died. It was the next generation that inherited the land and entered to take possession of it. Today, we are being told that young people are so afraid of failure they will not take risks. In the process, they are cutting themselves off from development and the growth they need to prepare them for the future. This is not my assessment, but the conclusion of people that have studied the rising generation. All of us need the different spirit that Caleb possessed, whatever age we may be. What we are learning is that anyone can grow, if they see life as filled with growing opportunities and they are willing to take reasonable risks. It turns out that it is much less risky to step forward than it is to stay behind. God blessed Caleb and Joshua and opened the way for them into the land of promise because they kept faith with God, and they were willing to trust God with what was ahead. Now, Carol Dweck called this a mindset, a way of looking at life that is opened to

learning, even if that learning comes through struggle and failure. We are in a position to trust God because of Jesus and the guarantee of his love and care.

Let's pray:

Lord, we find resignation easier than persistence. Show us Jesus as he faced the cross and all that it would mean. He didn't turn away, but instead he trusted his Father. Help us to do the same. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, July 20

The couple struggled in their marriage for years. But something happened that they sought out a counselor. The woman had left her husband. She packed up quietly one morning when he was not at the house, and she moved to an apartment to live by herself. Now, mind you, for years, she had been begging her husband to see a counselor. But he had always refused. For years she had lived with his dramatic mood changes, angry outbursts and lying. It was the lying that was the worst. She suspected he had been spending time with someone else. Whenever she asked, whenever she brought the subject up, there was anger and more of it. Gone were the moments of connection and love between them. She felt she had tried everything to help them move forward, to help them seek help. She just could not continue on any longer.

Now, here is our text for today:

Numbers 14:39-45

³⁹ When Moses told these words to all the people of Israel, the people mourned greatly. ⁴⁰ And they rose early in the morning and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, "Here we are. We will go up to the place that the LORD has promised, for we have sinned." ⁴¹ But Moses said, "Why now are you transgressing the command of the LORD, when that will not succeed? ⁴² Do not go up, for the LORD is not among you, lest you be struck down before your enemies. ⁴³ For there the Amalekites and the Canaanites are facing you, and you shall fall by the sword. Because you have turned back from following the LORD, the LORD will not be with you." ⁴⁴ But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, although neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD nor Moses departed out of the camp. ⁴⁵ Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them and pursued them, even to Hormah.

Now, this turning point in the book catches us off guard. Here's why. The congregation of Israel had already decided not to enter the land. They deemed it too dangerous. They did not trust the Lord, and they believed they would not succeed. They saw fortified cities and became afraid. But now they are choosing to move forward. Why are they doing this now? What has changed? They had heard the consequences of their disobedience from Moses. Before, they refused to enter into the land, and now they are ready to go. They are not moving forward because their hearts have changed. No, they have heard that since they would not trust the Lord, they would die in the wilderness. The Lord waited until the next generation was ready to lead them into the land. We need to understand why they decide to enter into the land at this point. It is not because of a real change of heart. No, they are avoiding the consequences of their earlier actions. Sadly, they will go into the land alone, and they will be defeated just as they feared. The Lord would not protect them. The Lord did not fight for them. Now, let me return to the couple that finally showed up to see a counselor. They were not there because the man experienced a change of heart. The man did not really want to solve the problems between him and his wife. No, he just wanted her to come home. He didn't want to live with the consequences of his actions. Indeed, in the first meeting, the man said: If I come to counseling with you, will you now come home? Of course, if she did, she knew that counseling would likely end, and end quickly. Now, what we are looking at here is the difference between true and false repentance. False repentance is more concerned about removing consequences than repairing a relationship. In our text today, the people do not fall before the Lord in true repentance and, in grief, confess their faithlessness. No, they attempt to go into the land, and they do this on their own. They are trying to prove something to the Lord, and they fail miserably. I am not happy to report that the couple never did come back together. There was never a true repentance and seeking after healing in their relationship. That would require real repentance. That is the difference. Real repentance cares less about the consequences and more about the state of the relationship. It is sadness and grief over the separation, the rift between the parties, in this case, the people and the Lord.

Here's a word from 2 Corinthians 7:10:

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

Now, of course, this begs the question: how can we experience true repentance? Two thoughts come to mind. First, we must practice repentance each day, taking time to notice those things we have done that pull our hearts from God, that are more about self-dependence than a healthy God dependence. Living a life of repentance keeps our hearts tender toward God and aware of our need for his grace at every turn. Second, we ask God to prompt us by His Holy Spirit to reveal our hearts to us. Sin is deceptive and blinding. But God can and will open our eyes to our condition and our need for him. He does this not to destroy us, but to open for us the way to life. When we see our own hearts and receive his grace, we don't flee from consequences. We flee from sin and independence from God.

Let's pray:

Gracious and loving heavenly Father, it is true. We are blind to so much of our sin and our pride. You are patient in your love, always wanting us to come to repentance because you want us to come to life. Pour out your Spirit on me today that I might see my need and rest in your forgiveness. For I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, July 21

For 16 years, Sandy and I lived right outside of New York City in a small New Jersey town. That part of the state had been changed a hundred years before by a large influx of immigrants from Europe, mostly from Italy. Before the mass migration, the community had been established by immigrants from Northern Europe, mostly Dutch Reformed. Old historic churches dotted the countryside as a reminder that these people had settled there earlier, in the late 1600s and the early 1700s. They were more than 75% of the population until about 1900, when the area became about 75% Italian Roman Catholic. So, imagine how difficult the transition had been in those small towns. Now, I share this because in this country, people are always on the move. Miami is the scene of successive waves of migration from the Caribbean, Central America and South America. As regimes rise and fall in those places, people flock to Miami for survival and for a future. Today, Miami is one of the most diverse cities in the country. But diversity always comes with a price. Leadership is always changing hands. There seem to be unending struggles for power and place, opportunity and success. So, what is the way forward?

Here is our text today from the book of Numbers:

Numbers 15:13-16

¹³Every native Israelite shall do these things in this way, in offering a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the LORD. ¹⁴And if a stranger is sojourning with you, or anyone is living permanently among you, and he wishes to offer a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the LORD, he shall do as you do. ¹⁵For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you, a statute forever throughout your generations. You and the sojourner shall be alike before the LORD. ¹⁶One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you."

Now, we may assume as we read the story of Israel that the people that left Egyptian slavery was a monolithic group, unified by their faith and nationality. But no, from the start, other enslaved people saw the Exodus from Egypt as their opportunity for freedom. They attached themselves to the Jewish people and began to share in the journey. This presented Israel with an immense problem. How can you maintain your distinctiveness as a people if other people live among you? So, among the Jewish people we see a strong tension emerge, the tension between exclusion and embrace. Now, exclusion for them meant that they kept away from others, and they kept others away from them. The Lord told them to separate themselves from the surrounding nations and not to adopt their practices. At the same time, God often told the people to embrace strangers and sojourners that were among them, hence the tension. Now, notice in our text for today, that the faith was never meant to be exclusive. Indeed, the plan God had for his people was that their faith would spread to the whole world. Through Abraham, all nations would be blessed. So, in that sense, the faith was not an exclusive faith. It was open to outsiders. Indeed, the Lord told his people to love the alien and the

stranger because they at one time were strangers in Egypt. They know what it is like to be on the outside looking in, but feeling left out. Our text tells us that aliens and strangers were welcome to present their offerings before the Lord. They could approach God and worship him as well. Now, here is what happened over time to Israel. They forgot their calling. The book of Jonah tells how God sent one of Israel's prophets to nearby Nineveh with a message of repentance for the people. Jonah, and the Jewish people, had no love for the Ninevites. He had no desire to deliver the Lord's message. Indeed, when God finally got Jonah to the city, he preached the worst sermon likely ever given. But nonetheless, the people repented and turned to the Lord. Jonah was furious with the Lord over this. You see, increasingly Israel excluded the outsider. They forgot God's command to embrace. It is true that such a tension is difficult to sustain. It is difficult to get things right. Indeed, when Jesus came, he restored the imbalance, revealing God's love for the broken, the outcast and the stranger. This is one reason why Jesus was opposed to the religious establishment. Now, let's return to our thoughts about Miami. We, too, feel this tension of exclusion and embrace. We know that God makes room for outcasts and strangers, but at the same time, we feel overwhelmed by the amount of change that is coming. It seems our natural response is more like Israel's, to close ourselves off from change and to exclude rather than embrace. I think this is why we will always feel this tension. But here is one final insight about this text. Strangers were being invited to come to the Lord for worship and to make offerings. The idea was that the outsiders would also come to worship and serve the Lord. Yes, that is the ultimate vision we carry in our hearts: the time when all the earth praises and knows the Lord, when all the peoples praise him.

Let us pray:

Lord God, deep in our hearts we desire to protect ourselves and our way of life, yet life seems always to be changing in Miami. Give to us this vision of your kingdom coming fully on earth as it is in heaven. Thank you for the beautiful diversity of our city. Help us to know how to welcome newcomers to Miami, and at the same time guard our faith and the community we love so much. We look to you to show us your way of grace and truth, love and faithfulness. And, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Thursday, July 22

Last year, I was in the Florida keys boating and fishing offshore with a friend. It was a windy day, and the seas were rough, but we braved a trip to a reef a few miles out. Despite the water being a bit cloudy, it was a beautiful place. Here's what happened: as soon as we put a line in the water, fish swarmed from every side. It was shocking how many fish were there. So many places have been over-fished, and it is unusual to find a place like this. The seas were so rough that we didn't stay for very long. But the reef was so filled with life that it left an impression on us. The next day, I looked at one of the charts and discovered why the fishing was so good. We were on a protected reef. Fishing is illegal there. Then it all made sense. Now if a fish and game officer caught us fishing there, I'd have a good explanation. We had no idea fishing was prohibited there. But I also know that the game warden would tell us that ignorance of the law does not excuse us. A law is a law. It wouldn't matter that we didn't know. Now, let's stop to think about that. How could it be that ignorance of a law doesn't matter in a case like this? This understanding arose from the idea that law fundamentally comes from the Lord, that moral laws, right and wrong, are as fixed as physical laws like gravity. Ignorance of gravity doesn't protect the falling toddler, any more that ignorance of God's law somehow excuses us from sin. So, how did God handle ignorance of his law, or moments when the law was broken unintentionally?

Our text for today tells us:

Numbers 15:22-26

"But if you sin unintentionally, and do not observe all these commandments that the LORD has spoken to Moses, ²³ all that the LORD has commanded you by Moses, from the day that the LORD gave commandment, and onward throughout your generations, ²⁴ then if it was done unintentionally without the knowledge of the congregation, all the congregation shall offer one bull from the herd for a burnt offering, a pleasing aroma to the LORD, with its grain offering and its drink offering, according to the rule, and one male goat for a sin offering. ²⁵ And the priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the people of Israel, and they shall be forgiven, because it was a mistake, and they have brought their offering, a food offering to the LORD, and their sin offering before the LORD for their mistake. ²⁶ And all the congregation of the people of Israel shall be

forgiven, and the stranger who sojourns among them, because the whole population was involved in the mistake.

Yes, God addresses moments like this, times when we don't know or when we make a mistake. Notice that God never sets aside his law. He doesn't tell his people not to worry about it, or that it does not matter. The people must make a sacrifice, in this case a burnt offering. Indeed, this sounds like the same sacrifice that must be made in the case of intentional sin as the book of Leviticus reminds us. Come on, doesn't God ever give people a break? I mean, if they make a mistake, can God just not overlook it, and the people can then move on? No, he cannot, and he will not.

Listen to the way the Lord describes himself to Moses:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." Exodus 34:6-7

God will not clear the guilty, even those that sin unintentionally. Why not? He can't. He is holy, and he created the world in light of his own character. Again, his moral law, right and wrong, are as indelible as the physical laws that govern our world. Some people would say even more permanent because the character of God is older than our world, and God himself is unchangeable. But he can and does make a way for forgiveness. Both are true. God can't turn a blind eye, but he is a God of grace, and he provides a way for people to be restored. Now, usually human beings fail on both accounts. We act as if sin is no big deal. It doesn't mean much to us. But then also, we do not provide a way for forgiveness and restoration. You see, God is more holy and more loving and more forgiving than we are. This truth comes into clearest focus in the person of Jesus, the Son of God. His purpose for coming into our world was to solve the sin problem and to restore our fellowship with God. He came because God cannot clear the guilty, and also because the Lord is gracious and compassionate. The mercy and judgment of God meet at the cross. We can rejoice that mercy triumphs over judgment. Because of Jesus, we have life and forgiveness. Somehow, I think that if the Fish and Game Officer had come by that day, he wasn't going to make a way for forgiveness. He was going to issue us a citation.

Let's pray together:

Lord God, we would love to think that most of our sin is unintentional, just a mistake we have made. But we know this is not true. We are rebels at heart, and we want life our own way. Thank you that your mercy and love are great enough to provide a way to life and forgiveness. Loving Father, forgive us for what we have done and what we have left undone. Restore us that we might be whole. Return to us the joy of our salvation and give us a willing Spirit to sustain us. For we pray in the name of the one that rescued us, Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Friday, July 23

Ok, a few years ago, I had an immense problem. Getting a little older and gaining a little weight meant that my wedding ring no longer fit. Yes, the emphasis is on little, but the problem was big. I needed a wedding ring. I didn't want to dishonor my wife nor send signals to anyone about our marriage. Now, here was another problem. Though I could find another wedding ring, so much meaning was invested in the one that no longer fit. It is the one we exchanged on our wedding day all those years ago. The ring could be replaced, but the significance of it could not.

Now, here is our text for today:

Numbers 15:37-40

³⁷ *The LORD said to Moses,* ³⁸ *"Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. ³⁹And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. ⁴⁰So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. ⁴¹I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the LORD your God."*

This passage seems strange to say the least. Why spend time in the word of God giving us the rule about wearing tassels? Really, was this important? It seems like little more than a fashion statement. If you have seen conservative Jewish men, likely you have seen the tassels being described here. They hang along the fringe of their garments and are easily visible. What is the big deal? And what is the purpose of the blue thread or cord that is to be part of each tassel? The tassels the Lord asked his people to place on the edges of their clothing were like my wedding ring. They were to be a sign the people wore that could be seen each day. It was meant to be a reminder to them of their calling and also of God's covenant. First, the tassel was to be attached to their clothing so they might remember that God saved them, bringing them out of bondage to the Egyptians and to freedom. God speaks his own name over the people twice. Authority in ancient times was connected to naming of people, but here it is found in the Lord sharing and speaking his name over the people. Think again of wedding vows, "I, [fill in your name], take you to be my wedded wife, to have to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until we are parted by death." Yes, God is speaking his covenant over his people and giving them a visible sign of their relationship. When the people see the tassel, they are to remember the Lord and his commands and not follow in their own way, but follow the Lord.

Proverbs 3 reads: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not unto your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*

Now, you may wonder about the meaning of the blue thread or cord that was to be part of the tassel. What does that mean? The Lord commanded that blue cloth be used in various places: the ark, God's throne here on earth, was to be wrapped in blue fabric. Blue curtains adorned the tent of meeting, and blue cloth was to be used for part of the high priest's uniform. This is more than a statement of kingship. Among the Jewish people, the blue communicated two things. First, there is life. That is why the Lord's throne is wrapped in blue, symbolic of giving of life. The Lord is the source of all life, the Lord of the living and not the dead. So, the tassel reminded them of the Lord and the sum, all of the commands of the covenant. But everyone was to wear tassels to show that they were a kingdom of priests. They each were to wear the color the high priest wore as a reminder. So, the tassel became so important among the Jewish people because it reminded them of their covenant with the Lord of life and their calling to serve as priests for the world. Worn every day, they were to remember always who they were and what their mission was in the world. We also can benefit from signs reminding us of our calling and our connection to the Lord. Now, back to my wedding band. Ultimately, I found one just like the old one, but a size and half larger. While there is so much sentimental value attached to the first ring, what the ring symbolizes is so much important than the sign itself. This is also true of the signs of our faith, our baptism and also the Lord's supper. It is not the water, the bread, the wine that gives us life. It is God's love for us in Christ. In these signs, we also see our identity and our mission to live as holy and dearly loved and to reflect his glory for the world to see.

Let's pray:

Ever faithful and gracious God, we so easily forget our mission. We can forget that we are yours and that we have been loved with an everlasting love. As you gave Noah and all humankind the rainbow, continue to remind us of your covenant with us through Jesus. Thank you for the bread we break and the cup we share. Help us to remember our Lord's death until he comes. For we pray in his name. Amen.

Saturday, July 24

I was born the middle of three boys. We were each twenty months apart. As you can imagine, to make our distinctive marks on the world, we each needed to create space. We wanted to stand out. When we were younger, we fought a lot. Some of it was playful and fun. Some was more like combat. Yes, that means fists and nosebleeds. The way it worked with three was that someone always seemed to be working to create an alliance. Two could always win against one. Looking back on it now, it seemed silly. But at the time, it seemed the only way. Now, as we turn to the next chapter of Numbers, we find an immense family conflict opening up. With time on their hands, fights were bound to emerge. The children of Israel really did act like children, siblings fighting with each other for position and power.

Here's how it got started:

Numbers 16:1-4

Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men. ²And they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. ³They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" ⁴When Moses heard it, he fell on his face...

We are told from the start that the conflict started with a man named Korah. He wasn't a nobody. We are told that he is from the tribe of Levi. That means he is one of Moses' own relatives. Yes, this rebellion begins with a family dispute. This reminds us of how Genesis begins after the fall. Cain and Abel are living their lives, but below the surface for Cain, there is a competition...for significance and for supremacy. The point comes in which Cain can see no other way to the top than eliminating the competition. This story is repeated over and over again in the book of Genesis. Esau and Jacob do the same, except their conflict begins in the womb. Even before they are born, they are fighting over who will be first. Later, we find them fighting over who will inherit the family blessing, who will succeed in life and gain the father's endorsement. You would think Jacob, having lived this story himself, would go to great lengths to prevent repeating it. But he favors his son, Joseph, setting up a conflict between Joseph and his brothers that fills much of the end of the book of Genesis. As it turns out, the story my brothers and I lived is as old as humanity. This is why we should expect it to arise again and again. Now, for Korah, here was the rub. Moses, his relative, was not only the leader. But it appears that Moses gave the priesthood to his particular branch of the family, to Aaron his brother. So, it looks like the leadership of Israel is concentrated in Moses' nuclear family. Of course, it was the Lord that chose Aaron to be high priest and Aaron's family to be the priesthood, but to Korah it all reeks of nepotism, a misuse of power by Moses. Now, here's the thing about Korah. Part of what he says is right. All Israel is holy. Any family could become priests for the people because God already has stated that Israel is a kingdom of priests. As we read the story, there is so much sorting out to do. First, there is the family part. Often there is such envy in families. Most of us have experienced this growing up. In no place has it been clearer to me than when an inheritance is given. Children receive the gifts of their parents, but what seems like a simple act can destroy a family, wreaking havoc for the next generation to process. If distributions are not the same, then problems easily arise. It is difficult for parents to do this well, and even more difficult for children to take it well. Again, we seem to be always comparing our fate with that of our siblings. One incident in my family stands out. On one particular day, my younger brother and I got into an immense fight. My dad could see it all playing out so he tied our arms together with a piece of rope and told us, "You are going to have to learn to get along. I want to you to see how you are joined together so I am tying you together for the afternoon." Now, of course, we could easily untie the rope, but he promised us that if we did, he would tie us together again, and then for even longer. He was trying to show us that we were bound up together, whether we liked it or not. This was true of Moses with Korah and ultimately with all of Israel. This is a lesson we desperately need to learn. We may be living separate stories, but we are joined to each other and bound together by the cords of God's love for us. Indeed, in Christ, God has formed us into his new family. When one part suffers, the others suffer with it. When one part rejoices, all can enter into that joy.

Let's pray:

Lord, as we go through the day, we need the reminder of the intimate connection we have with you, so that we can remember we belong to each other. Lord, each of us has a streak of independence running through our hearts. Forgive us, and teach us your way of peace that we might walk together in a way that honors what Jesus has done at the cross to make us one. For we pray in his name. Amen.