

The Danger of Cheapening God's Grace (2 Peter 2:1-22)

Introduction:-

*During the Spanish Civil War, General Emilio Mola marched on a city. He was asked how many columns of men he had. "Five" he is said to have replied. "Four at my back and a fifth column inside the walls." His reference to the partisans ready to fight for him inside the sieged city gave rise to a powerful image of betrayal and enmity: **the fifth column**. In our passage today, Peter's contention is that although the church is buffeted from outside, her greatest weakness and danger comes from the enemy within, her own fifth column. Let us now take a closer look at this chapter in order to identify more fully this danger of which Peter speaks, and the way in which Peter addresses the problem at hand.*

1. First we are confronted with the Danger of the Fifth Column (verses 1-3)

*Having stressed the importance of genuine Spirit-given prophecy and the prospect of its fulfilment at the conclusion of the previous chapter, Peter now gives a prophetic warning about false prophets and teachers who will infiltrate the church, seeking to lead many people astray. And so, just as there were "false prophets" in the days of the Old Testament, beginning with Moses' identification of them at Deuteronomy 13:1-5, finally leading people away to worship other gods, so in the church of God's people, there will be "false prophets" whom Peter is also prepared to call "false teachers", because their claim played down the supernatural. These will lead the people of God astray through false teaching and behaviour. At Acts 13:1 we read that at the church of Antioch there were "prophets" and "teachers", which may suggest that these roles complemented each other within the missionary outreach of the early church. In any case, here in verses 1-3, these "false teachers" merit the term "false", both on the basis of the **content** of their teaching, as well as on their **claim** to be teachers. And in these opening three verses, these "false teachers" are deemed to be dangerous on three grounds. (1) First, their **method** is devious and underhand, by secretly and subversively introducing their own opinions and heresies (or "self-chosen beliefs"), denying the Sovereign Lord who had purchased them with his own blood (cf. 1 Peter 1:18-19), thus bringing swift destruction upon themselves. (2) Secondly, this will cause many to follow them in their **shameful ways**, in which knowledge is regarded as superior to practice and holiness, causing "the way of truth" to be blasphemed and fall into disrepute. (3) Finally, they will **exploit** the unsuspecting through fabricated (or "plastic") words or stories designed to suit the ears of the hearers, for their own financial and shameful ends, whose final judgment will not delay, but will certainly come (v.3). And so in this way, Peter paints a picture of these "false-teachers" who are marked by their subversive and shameful ways, through made-up stories, greed, and lack of integrity. They also despise external authority, live for adultery, have no respect for the law of God, and are full of arrogance and pride. And so we can begin to see a permissiveness of conduct, leading to a cheapening of God's grace. Can we see something similar in the church today? If so, then what should we do?*

2. Secondly we are confronted with the Judgment and Salvation of God (verses 4-10a)

*In this section, Peter develops the theme of judgment from verse 3 more fully. If God's judgment is real but future, how should Christians live in the meantime? In order to answer this question, Peter now gives us **three examples** from the Old Testament to prove that God has judged in the past, and will judge again in the future, in order to show us how we should live in the present. With regard to these three examples, Peter shares much with Jude, but each have clear and independent lines of thought. Both include the examples of the angels and Sodom and Gomorrah in the same order, but Peter replaces the delivered Israelites from Egypt with the flood, and introduces his important theme of living in an impure world. In terms of order, Peter follows the book of Genesis, beginning with Genesis 6:1-4 with the angels, followed by Genesis 6:5-9:17 with the flood, followed by Genesis 18:16-19:29 with Sodom and Gomorrah. The examples of*

judgment gradually reduce in scale, from the cosmic angels who crossed boundaries, through to the widespread flood on earth, to the local cities of the plain. This helps Peter explain why we are still waiting for a final, cosmic judgment. Finally, Peter carefully accumulated his key words. The angels have sinned through the crossing of boundaries that God had set, and are being held for judgment without exception (cf. Jude 6 = because of pride). Noah's world may be ungodly, but he stands for righteousness, and so he and those who believe in him are protected. Sodom and Gomorrah are not only ungodly, but are also lawless (mentioned twice), but Lot is righteous (mentioned three times), and so is rescued. Finally, Peter concludes in verse 9 with the thought that God knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment. As well as speaking of judgment, Peter reminds his audience of the reality of God's mercy and grace. Noah was spared, as was Lot. Even in these difficult passages of divine destruction, there is a light which is God's deliverance of his righteous people. Genesis 18:25 says: "Will not the judge of all the earth do right?" Let us rejoice in the fact that God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in the time of trouble" (Psalm 46:1). God never promises immunity from trials - centuries of Christian experience prove this all too well - but he does promise to deliver us through such struggles.

3. Thirdly, we are confronted with a Freedom that is not really Free! (Verses 10b-22)

In this third and last section of this chapter, Peter now emphasizes the dangerous influence of these false teachers by describing their true nature or **character** more fully, as a frame to verses 1-3. It is a reminder of the saying: "Sow a thought and reap an action, sow an action and reap a character, sow a character, and reap a destiny." Jesus has already addressed the issue of false prophets/teachers and their messages at Matthew 7:15-23, when he says: "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit... thus by their fruits you shall know them." Well, what kind of trees are presented in these final verses? Here Peter reflects Jude 8-12. In verses 10b-16 the false teachers are described as bold and arrogant, without understanding and respect toward celestial beings, and are experts in greed and adultery, seducing the unstable in the faith, without any sense of shame or decorum, performing their shameful acts in broad daylight, whilst feasting with you at your fellowship meals in connection with the Lord's Supper. As such, they are spots and blemishes, who have forsaken the right way, following the path of **Balaam**, who tried time and time again to prophesy against Israel for Balak's reward. But it took a donkey to speak into this situation in order to address the "madness" of the prophet (v. 16). Such an animal was more spiritually attuned to the voice and truth of God, than this false prophet! Finally, in verses 17-22, false prophets/teachers promise much, but deliver little, because false teaching and evil living often go hand in hand. Such people are "springs without water" and "clouds without rain" (v. 17). For whilst they mouth empty boastful words by appealing to the lustful desires of the flesh, they entice the vulnerable who are trying to escape from those very things. And in doing so, they promise freedom, whilst they themselves are slaves to the same depravity - for people are slaves to whatever has mastered them (vv. 18-19). Finally, verses 20-22 could possibly refer to the new and vulnerable converts, or more probably, to the false teachers. Either way, to have known the commandment and path of truth, and then to depart from it, by being entangled again with the sins that once bound us, not only makes our latter end worse than the first, but makes the prospect of return next to impossible (Luke 11:24-26; Hebrews 6:4-8).

Conclusion:-

Do we know what true freedom is today? Does that mean that I can do as I like? If we follow Peter's example, it will mean that we will become a "slave" of Jesus Christ in order that we might become truly free, and so share a "like precious faith" and destiny with him (2 Peter 1:1). May we find and rejoice in this kind of freedom today.

Amen