

LIVING ON EARTH WITH A DIVINE NATURE - Part thirteen
Studies in 2 Peter - Sunday, May 19th, 2019 - Teaching #2132
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WHEN THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM TURNS SOUR

2 Peter 2:17-22 - “These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. [18] For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. [19] ***They promise them freedom***, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For ***whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved***. [20] For if, after ***they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ***, they are again ***entangled in them*** and overcome, ***the last state has become worse for them than the first***. [21] For it would have been better for them ***never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them***.”

This text continues Peter’s warning of false teachers that will certainly arise in the church. He began this warning right in the first verse of chapter two and continues with it. This is Peter’s final attempt to safeguard these churches from the tempting, destructive, careless words of these false teachers. This seems to be his primary concern as an old apostle about to die.

Just pause here. Think about how opposite this apostle’s tone is from the cultural mind-set of our age. As we prize our open-mindedness, mature people are taken to be those who ***don’t*** - who never ***would*** - pass any judgment on the idea of others. The more ***accepting*** you are, the more ***godly*** you are. That principle is so universal it isn’t even questioned anymore - even in the church.

Yet Peter has taken a whole chapter to build a carefulness and repulsion in the minds of this church with regard to the conceptual errors of some of their leaders and friends. Nowhere are Peter’s words stronger than in our text today.

This radical change in tone in Peter’s letter started at the beginning of chapter two. We’ve spent two weeks studying it. If there is anything new in our text today it would be the shift in emphasis. In the previous verses Peter has been majoring on the corrupt ***character*** of these people (and he will do so again). But in today’s text, he begins to outline the ***message*** of these false teachers. He begins to unfold aspects of their approach to the people, their message and its appeal. We begin to get a handle on the way they did their work in the churches.

1) **EVERY FALSE TEACHING COMES WITH THE PROMISE OF SOMETHING SPECIAL FOR THOSE WHO WILL FOLLOW**

2 Peter 2:17 - “These are ***waterless springs and mists driven by a storm***. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.”

Catch the imagery here. You look up at the sky from your drought baked farm. You think you see something promising in the distance. Dark clouds. Or you desperately make your way to a spring on a hot day to relieve the agony of your thirst. But the clouds hold no rain and the spring is dry.

It’s not a complicated picture. We would all recognize how disappointing it would be to come to a well, or spring on a hot day, only to find that there was no water there. And we’ve all had the experience of seeing our lawn grow a little brown, and, wanting to keep the water bill down, grow expectant as dark storm clouds roll in with the promise of rain. We all know how cooling and refreshing water is when it comes in these forms.

But that doesn’t really even scratch the surface of what Peter is trying to say here. In Peter’s day, in the Middle East, a dried up well wasn’t just a disappointment. It was a matter of life or death. And the rain clouds that rolled in weren’t just a refreshing luxury. They meant the difference between crops and herds or nothing at all. Empty clouds and dry wells meant no ***future***.

But Peter is thinking of the chronic danger of a drought of ***truth***. Peter warns of false teachers who ***will come***. And one of the hallmarks of their message is the promise of life. They attract people the way a well attracts a thirsty crowd. They ***corral people to themselves with the promise of something great***.

But you must come ***to them***. You must only listen ***to them***. This is always a central trait of dangerous teaching. When the emphasis isn’t on the Scriptures, but rather, a ***person***, or a ***place***, or some ***additional revelation***, there is always the need for care and concern.

You can still see this same trait today. The Bible is good, but you also need **this little book or magazine**. The church is good, **but you should also join this group**. You must come **here** for the truth. You must come **here** for the renewal. You need **this seminar**. You must have **this podcast**. There is always the promise of something special to those who will give their exclusive allegiance to these leaders.

But there's another important issue at least implied in this verse. When Peter analyzes these false teachers, he's actually comparing them to the true power and nourishment of the Word of God. In saying they are wells without water, he's really drawing attention, by contrast, to the true, refreshing, life giving power of God's Word in our lives.

How important is the input of Biblical truth into your life? In your devotional life - your church attendance - your study of the Scriptures - **just what is at stake?** Because whatever else Peter is saying in this verse, he is **certainly** saying **we need the Scriptures, not merely the way we need the newspaper, but we need the truth of the Scriptures the way we need water!** Peter is decrying the work of these false teachers, not just because they are wrong - not just because they are theologically incorrect - but because **there's no water there**. And without water, we will die.

You can't live on worship alone. You can't live on fellowship alone. These are wonderful and important but they contain no independent life on their own apart from a deep feeding on the Word of God.

Remember, whatever problem you're facing right now, whatever situation you are working through in your marriage, whatever you fear in terms of failure in the future or regret from the past, always remember this - **whatever steps you take to solve your problem, whatever counsel you receive, whatever you think you can or cannot do on your own, you need the Word like you need water!**

Make it an unbreakable life commitment. You simply will not put your head on the pillow to sleep at night without some time spent reading God's Word. Keep God's Word mentally at the center of your life. I don't mean that as a doctrinal principle you're been raised to agree with. I mean the **time** of your life. You give God's Word as much time as you give Netflix.

Wherever you go and whatever you listen to, for goodness sake, **make sure the Word is central**. That goes for this church as well as any other. Peter says there are lots of voices - lots of wells out there - that look refreshing but have no water. There are lots of plans and lots of promises, but only God's Word brings life:

Psalm 1:1-3 - "**Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; [2] but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. [3] He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.**"

"Well, pastor Don, if these false teachers were just wells without water, why would people listen to them. Why did Peter say that **many** would follow them" - **2 Peter 2:2** - "**And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.**"

That leads to my second point:

2) **FALSE TEACHERS SUCCEED BY CAREFULLY PICKING THEIR AUDIENCE, AND BY KNOWING WHAT TO PROMISE THEIR FOLLOWERS**

2 Peter 2:18-19 - "**For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. [19] They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.**"

Admittedly, these are not easy verses to handle in a sermon. But let's try to divide them up around the two main thoughts in my point heading. First, there's the **carefully chosen audience** - "**those who are barely escaping from those who live in error.**" Then, second, there's the **carefully baited promise** - "**they promise them freedom.**"

Let's look at each of these:

- a) **The audience.** In every church you have people who are not long out of the woods spiritually. Perhaps they have just come to the Lord. They're brand new Christians. Or, perhaps they have just experienced a real brush with spiritual ruin. They've fallen into some moral failure. They've become all entangled in the pull of

the material things of this world. They've been careless about how they have fed their minds and hearts.

Perhaps most commonly, many in the church have been where they are spiritually for years. They don't do much deep thinking about where they are spiritually. Everything is just **assumed**.

But whatever the sin, they've just recently been awakened from their spiritual sleep. God, in His grace has brought them back to Himself.

Now comes the important part. Peter says the devil most of them don't seriously think about will never rest while these ones, who **"are barely escaping from those who live in error"(18)** - are still within reach. They've just **barely escaped**, and the enemy wants them back.

Remember it all your life. When you're worn out, when you're afraid, when you're weary with life, when you're confused about what you should do next, when you're frustrated and angry with the church, when you're having a hard time at the office, or you're fed up with your spouse, or when you're depressed - remember, **there will always be someone there with the instant solution, with the easy compromise, with the kind of religion that will leave you free to do as you please.** The enemy will see to it.

- b) So there's a snapshot of the **audience**. Now, the nature of the **promise**:
The promise. The bottom line is they promise **freedom** - **"...they promise them freedom..."(19)**. But the exact **nature** of that freedom is spelled out earlier on in the preceding verse: **2 Peter 2:18** - **"For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error."**

So the freedom offered by these false teachers was a freedom to indulge the senses, to gratify the **"passions of the flesh."** **Passions** doesn't mean **sexual desires**. Many translations have the word **"sensual."** Peter means things **material** - things **experienced by our senses** - things **material** - things **immediate** - things **pleasurable**.

This was the theme of Peter's whole letter. He opened this letter celebrating God's deliverance from the destructive desires of the flesh - **2 Peter 1:3-4** - **"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, [4] by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire."**

But now, says Peter, there were false teachers **promoting** God's grace as a means of **remaining** in these destructive desires. And the people who listened to them were taught that the grace of the cross was such that there was no reason for them to turn from sense-gear'd living. There would be no judgement for them because Jesus had died on the cross.

False teachers, then and now, succeed because so many people don't know the difference between the **kind of freedom Jesus offers**, and the **kind of freedom they offer**. False teachers **count** on people not knowing the difference.

This is so important. You can't live the Christian life well without understanding this. If you've never heard the difference between these two kinds of freedom, let me tell you what it is.

Peter has already taught about the nature of true Christian freedom in his first letter: **1 Peter 2:16** - **"Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God."**

True Christian freedom frees us to serve God. False freedom frees us to indulge ourselves. True freedom frees us from **our sin**. False freedom frees us from **our conscience**. True Christian freedom is the result of the **power of the Holy Spirit** overriding our fallen desires and inclinations. We are free to **love God's laws and ways**. True Christian freedom is the power to **overcome the natural ways of the flesh**:

Galatians 5:13 - **"For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."**

"Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh!" We really need to sound the alarm today.

This old deception is thriving in the modern church. Multitudes of people have actually come to believe that they can bring anything and everything in terms of lifestyle into the Christian life. They think they can live like everybody else, only they add the delightful concept that all their sinful pursuits are covered by the death of Jesus. ***And it's all a lie.***

There is no freedom to cater to the flesh in the Christian life. There never has been and there never will be. **Romans 8:13** is still true - **"For if you live according to the flesh you will die....!"**

Then, in that same verse, Paul goes on to describe true Christian freedom: **Romans 8:13b** - **"....but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."**

Through the life of Jesus in our hearts by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, we have been given the power, ***the freedom***, to put to death the deeds of the flesh. We are free to serve God from a new heart. Our love for Christ and our tasting of His precious grace makes catering to our own selfish desires an empty and odorous pursuit.

That's Peter's whole point. Christian freedom is never freedom to ***cater*** to the flesh. Christian freedom is freedom to ***crucify*** the flesh. That understanding is basic to everything else in the Christian life.

3) **THE DANGER OF DEPARTING FROM THE TRUTH ONCE YOU KNOW IT**

2 Peter 2:20-22 - **"For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. [21] For *it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.* [22] What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire."**

Certainly these are some of the sternest, most graphic words in all the Scriptures. But we mustn't evade or gloss over them too quickly just because they don't suit our tastes. Actually, they sum up the message of this whole second chapter in a clear, unforgettable way.

The fundamental message of these false teachers can be reduced to a nutshell. They are saying you can have the blessing of salvation on your own terms. You can still continue to live by your old desires and instincts. The fundamental warning of these closing verses is this - and it's a very challenging, disquieting message: ***It is better not to embrace the Christian faith at all, then to think you can participate in the blessings of redemption while shunning the call to holy living.***

Notice how carefully Peter words these closing arguments. In **verse 20** he acknowledges their appreciation of Jesus Christ - **2 Peter 2:20** - **"....they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...."** So they know about Jesus. They love Jesus. They are glad He died for their sins. They understand their need of a Savior and they want to go to heaven. So they come to Jesus.

Then look at **verse 21** - **"For it would have been better for them - never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them."** They love Jesus. What they resist is the call to holiness - **"....to turn back from the holy commandment."**

They don't turn from Jesus. That's not what they would say. They would say they still ***love*** Jesus. But they turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. ***And Peter refuses to let them go on thinking they can keep Jesus as Savior while shunning holiness!*** They can't. And you can't. And I can't. Not then. Not now. Not ever. Peter's argument continues:

2 Peter 2:22 - **"What the true proverb says has happened to them: 'The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.'"**

Especially the first of these two images disgusts us a little bit. It makes us a little sick. And you can't help but thinking that Peter, and the Holy Spirit, is trying to shake us up a little bit. This is God's perspective on people who profess Jesus as Savior but turn back to living in old patterns of behavior. That's what God sees then I give in to greed, immorality, dishonesty, uncleanness.

The dog returning to its own vomit. The sow, constantly going back into the mud. Both are pictures of the

same old dirty life. Nothing is changed. There's nothing **new** in either of those pursuits. The habits are still old and dirty. You can't paint over this old life with a coat of grace. ***Real grace makes life new.***

And before it's too late, Peter warns of a day when we will stand before our Creator and Judge, only to discover that it would have been better not to know Jesus at all, than to come to Him for forgiveness, but refuse His call to holy living.

Yes, the Bible actually says that - **2 Peter 2:21** - "**For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.**"

Striking words. But what does Peter mean? How would it be better never to have known the way than to know it and turn from it? Because knowing it and then turning from it is sinning against light. This makes repentance harder the second time than the first. It is easier to be moved by the truth when it's brand new than when it's presumed and ignored and marginalized. So they're not worse off because they're more **lost**. They're worse off because they're **harder to reach**.

So make sure you get Peter's point. It's not just the unsaved who need to be careful. Treasure the truth you know. Warm it in your mind through prayer and thankful meditation. Never take the blessing of spiritual life for granted.