True Freedom and Knowing Christ
2 Peter 2:17-22

Let me begin by asking you a question. Have you ever taken advice from someone? Probably 'yes'. Could be about what to study, or your career, or your health, or how to invest your money.

But did you take that advice? Sometimes. What made you follow it? Probably a mixture… you trusted the person, it sounded good and wise but also because it offered an outcome you wanted.

But have you ever taken advice and later regretted it? 'Why did I listen to that?' And how much you regret it will depend on how much it's impacted your life.

But what if taking the wrong advice could ruin the whole course of your life? Not just damage your health, or your investments, or who you date, but everything about you. You'd want to be warned about taking that kind of advice, wouldn't you?

Which is why Peter spends a third of this letter taking aim at people he calls false teachers. Because what's a spiritual leader if not someone offering advice on how to live life? Advice with eternal implications. And what if it's the wrong advice? And what if, for us, the advise they were giving sounds strangely similar to what you'll read today in any number of books or blogs or hear on podcasts?

So we're going to look at three things: The Allure of Freedom; the Slavery of Freedom; and the One who Gives True Freedom.

The Allure of Freedom
Look at v18, '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.'

In his novel, *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens give us one of *the* fun characters of English Literature - Mr Micawber. And with his young family and long-suffering wife, Micawber lives in virtual poverty with the debt collectors forever knocking at his door, as the family lurches from one disaster to another because of his bad decisions. And yet, if you listen to him, he's always on the cusp of making some financial or career breakthrough, something good is always just around the corner. And he says it all in this flowery language. He is full of hot air, and yet, you can't help but love him.

Not so these false teachers. They are also full of hot air, Peter says, they also make big claims for themselves, but they are anything but lovable. And yet, there's something about them that's attractive.

As Rob pointed out last week, it's their confidence. It's their assertiveness. They sound like they know what they are talking about. They speak 'loud boasts of folly', Peter says. Does that sound familiar? Because whether it's these guys in 1st Century Asia Minor, or today's politicians or podcast hosts, there is something about assertive confidence that draws us in. That makes us trust. Especially, Peter says, if you're not well-grounded, if you're (v18) 'barely escaping from those who live in error.' Whether you live in 1st or 21st Century pagan culture, the way they present themselves appeals. Because when life seems uncertain and everything is changing, someone who *is* certain and assertive, can be magnetic.

Because it's not just their style - but their content. Content that can draw you in. Content that makes you want it. Like a fisherman using bait, these guys Peter says, v18, 'entice by sensual passions of the flesh.' And as we've seen the last two Sunday's, Peter is thinking sex. Because these false teachers are saying there is no final judgment, so you can get into bed with who you want.

But sensual passions is more than just sex. And maybe especially for us. It's to be passionate, it's to *want* what your senses want - what makes you *feel* good, what leaves you feeling fulfilled, *and you want that too much*. And it could be romance and that sense of feeling in love. It might be having that next great experience - travel or culture, and the kick you get from that, especially if you can broadcast it, and show others you're having it. It may be great food and wine - and it should just be a meal, but it's much more than that for you. It could be the passions that are stirred by politics and that feel good sense you have when someone else gets owned or burned. Or it could be that inner stab, that unpleasant feeling you experience when you see someone else's social media post - it's not so much their holiday or their stuff that you want, it's their life. The life they seem to be living.

And we can want those things too much, Peter says, we can be enticed by them, so that when someone comes along and says 'here's what you have to do to get them' we listen to them. And the pursuit of them begins to shape our lives.

But the message coming from these false teachers had another element. Verse 19, 'They promise freedom.' Freedom from constraint - whether that's about how you spend your money, or what you wear, or how much you eat and drink, or who you have sex with. When there's no judgment to come there's no need to listen to anyone telling you, 'you can't do that'. Because you can do and be whatever and whoever you want to do and be. Including today the freedom to pick your own gender.

And again, there something enticing about that kind of freedom. Especially when it's dressed up in a spiritual kind of language - that this is good for you. Because who doesn't want to be free?

The Slavery of Freedom

Imagine you're running a long distance race and you're however many kms in and you are thirsty and up ahead you see one of those water stations with people holding out cups to drink from, so you run over, grab a cup, and it's empty, so you grab the next one and that's empty and the next and they're all empty. What would you think?

Look at v17. Peter says these false teachers 'are waterless springs.' Like a runner in a race, or a traveller in a desert in need of a drink, false teachers then and now promise you water - something that will satisfy you on the inside, but in reality, Peter says, they leave you parched and thirsty. They tell you, this is the way to the good life you're looking for - for the love, the satisfaction, the pleasure, the significance and meaning you're after, and it's a dead end. Like an empty well, they promise much but you lower your bucket and bring it up empty.

And that's nothing new, even in Peter's day. Nearly 600 years before, God spoke through Jeremiah and said, 'My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water' (Jer 2:13). They thought turning their backs on God and worshipping other stuff would satisfy, and it was the opposite.

And that's because it's not just that that kind of thinking and teaching fails to deliver, it's that it stands in the way of what will. Verse 17, they are 'mists driven by a storm.'

One of our daughters recently visited one of those incredible mountain lake Instagram-postable locations. Except a storm blew in and with it the fog came down. And what should have been a photo of her in front of a stunning view was her, in a raincoat, with a grey wall obscuring the view. And that's what false teachers and views on life and bad advice do, Peter says. They tell you, 'pursue freedom, be yourself, live for what make you feel good and your life will be lived in glorious technicolour.' And it's a fog that obscures the truth that will really give you life.

Verse 19, 'They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption.' They're enslaved to an inner decay. Think how that might work. You see, firstly, when you think your personal freedom should be the thing that guides your life, you inevitably become self-centred. As Augustine put it, you become curved in on yourself. You become enslaved to yourself.

And that doesn't deliver you a great life, it delivers you increasing isolation and loneliness, because it cuts you off from community and the give and take that all good relationships require. In her recent song, *Flowers*, Miley Cyrus sings about a response to the break-up of a relationship. 'I can buy myself flowers; Write my name in the sand; Talk to myself for hours; Say things you don't understand; I can take myself dancing; And I can hold my own hand; Yeah, I can love me better than you can.' And the message is, I don't need you, I can love myself. And self-love beats all other loves.

Except it doesn't. All the data regarding the mental health of those raised in a culture of extreme individualism and total freedom says Peter's right, it's a waterless spring. It promises you freedom but what you get is depression. As one American sociologist (Twenge) writes, 'The lone self is a weak foundation for robust mental health… Individualism and freedom feel good when you are young but empty when you are older.'

But secondly, you become enslaved to those sensual passions, the stuff you think you need, or the life that other person is having, to feel good about yourself. And you can't be happy without it. It nags away at you. It begins to control you. You think you're free, but you end up enslaved by them. It's why Peter writes, v19 again, 'They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. *For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved*.'

You see, if in Peter's day a conquering army enslaved the people they conquered, so too can those things we want *so* much, *too* much, and we feel an inner compulsion to feed the habit. To spend more, to see more, to live more, and our self-control is overwhelmed.

It's why Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, whoever practices sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). Because whether it's a bad thing or a good thing that's become a demanding thing, you can be mastered by it.

But there's also a sense in which we can be slaves to our culture. You see, we are repeatedly told you are free to be yourself, to go your own way. And so you are never more conforming, you are never more owned by the culture, than when you do that, and buy into that. And when as has happened, big business and the advertisers get on the band wagon, and you can express your

individual self by the brands you wear, or the products you own, 'be yourself' is in reality 'buy yourself'. You're promised freedom, but in reality you're being owned.

And so what CS Lewis wrote is as true for the false teachers in Peter's day as our own: 'The power of man to make himself what he pleases means… the power of some men to make other men what they please.' They promise freedom but you end up enslaved - to self, to your passions, to culture and to the advertisers.

And that's not a great situation to be in, Peter says. Verse 20, 'For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.'

Now, is Peter's talking about the false teachers, or those who take their advice? And the answer is 'yes… probably both.' Because what does he mean that their last state will be worse than the first?

Well, go back to v17, where Peter's definitely got the false teachers in mind: 'These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. *For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved*.' Now when you want to go to a popular restaurant you call in advance and book a table, because it's good to know you've got seats reserved. But what could be worse than having a seat reserved in hell? And Peter's saying, but that's exactly the case for those who obscure the light of truth from others. They wanted and sold others a freedom from God and the light of his goodness, and so darkness is what they'll get. As John Calvin wrote, 'In place of the momentary darkness which they now cast, there is prepared for them a much thicker and eternal one.' Their last state will be worse than the first.

But when he gets to v21, Peter's probably referring to those taken in by the false teachers, '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', where the 'them' he's got in mind are those in v20, who 'after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ… are again entangled in them and overcome.'

So, imagine someone who seems to be coming to faith in Christ, or who already says they're a Christian, but who starts listening to all this other stuff about living the life, or personal freedom, and says 'you know what, Christianity's too narrow, I want to be free to decide for myself how I live.' They're in a worse situation than before, Peter says, because their heart's harder, because they've been inoculated and think, 'Christianity? Been there, done that, didn't work for me.'

And Peter says they're like someone held hostage by the enemy, who the special forces go in and rescue, but who on his way out, as they're trying to get him into the helicopter says, you know what, I'd rather stay here, and walks back. And the person who does that with their sin or their over-desires is worse off than before, Peter says, because now there's little chance of them ever wanting to be truly free.

I once knew a guy who gave every appearance of being a Christian, but his lack of a girlfriend bothered him. So he started using a dating app. Swipe right, swipe left. And one night he hooked up with someone. And it was as if his eyes had been opened. Except he knew enough to know that he couldn't have sex with whoever he was dating *and* Christianity. So he chose sex. And within days

his faith had all but disappeared. Desire, freedom, entangled, overcome. And no amount of reasoning would change his mind.

And Peter's saying, don't let that happen to you. Whatever your version of that would look like. You see, notice how in v21 he calls the Christian faith, 'the way of righteousness.' And in v2, he calls it 'the way of truth' and in v15, 'the right way.' It's a path to walk on. So in all the advice you are getting on how to live your life, 'watch your steps,' Peter says. You might think your freedom in how you use your money, or what you watch, or wear, or who you date, are minor things, but Jesus said the path to life is narrow. But each step we take is always going to be followed by another. So don't risk it taking you off the path, Peter says.

And to bring that home he uses two images. Verse 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." Now, to the person involved, what they really, really want - that romantic relationship, that next expensive trip, that other person's life, seems a beautiful thing. But in comparison to Christ, when chosen instead of Christ, Peter says it's like vomit and mud.

And God has something far better in store for you than that.

You see, it would be easy to hear all this stuff about leaders and advice givers and empty promises and just get a bit cynical. That, whether political, cultural, or religious, all leaders ever do is let you down. But that's not an argument for having no leaders, or teachers. It's an argument for having the only One who won't let you down.

The One Who Gives True Freedom

Look at v20, 'For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ…' So true freedom doesn't come from the pursuit of total freedom, living just how we want to live. True freedom, Peter says, comes with knowledge. But not the kind of life hacks you might get from the latest book or podcast. But through relational knowledge, by knowing Christ. Because when you know him, you love him and love him more than all this other stuff vying for your heart.

You see, Peter describes these false teachers as speaking 'loud boasts of folly' (v18). It's the danger of every influencer and advice giver. But not Jesus. They were full of empty words, but in the opening of his Gospel, John tells us that Jesus was full of grace and truth. And these guys, just like today, make much of themselves. But Isaiah said of Jesus that 'he will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench' (Is 42:2-3). And he didn't. And even at his trial, when given the chance to defend and save himself, 'he opened not his mouth.'

So whether it's in the 1st or 21st Century there will always be those who make empty boasts and empty promises, but in his birth and death Christ emptied himself that we might be filled.

You see, when Peter describes these teachers as 'waterless springs' (v17) he's saying, what they offer and advise you will never truly satisfy you. But Jesus came saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37), and to a woman who had gone through multiple romantic relationships trying to quench her inner thirst for love he says, "Whoever drinks of the water that I give will never be thirsty again" (John 4:14). It's why at the cross, he cried out, "I thirst" as he

experienced the inner emptiness of our sin, so that our thirst for love and significance and forgiveness might be forever satisfied in him.

And in v17, Peter calls these false teachers ‘mists driven by a storm’ obscuring the light. But at the cross as he took all our sin and all our wrong desires upon himself, it was Jesus, the light of the world, who was plunged into darkness of the storm of God’s wrath, so that we might forever live in the light.

And in v19 Peter says these teachers promise freedom when all along they’re enslaved to self and sin. But Jesus says of himself, but “If the Son sets you free you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). And his freedom was curtailed, and at the cross, he died the death of the slave, to set us free from slavery to sin and self and guilt and fear.

And when you increasingly know his love for you like that, that he is your saviour, you’ll increasingly love him more than your sensual passions.

But you also need to know him as your Lord, Peter says. Because something will always be your Lord, your master. And that’s either going to be corruption or Christ. So who would you rather be mastered by, the freedom that ultimately robs you of happiness, or culture and big business that owns you, or the Son of God who was sold for you? One who uses you, or the One who loves you so much he dies for you?

Well, Peter’s already told us the choice he’s made, as he opened this letter by calling himself, ‘Simon Peter, a servant… [literally, a slave]… of Jesus Christ’ (2 Peter 1:1). Because you’re always going to serve one master or other - so choose the one who really sets you free.

So, this week, consider taking an audit of what you’re reading, listening to, or watching. And ask yourself, what is this doing to my heart? Is it feeding wrong desires and passions? Is it getting me to buy into the false promise of individual freedom? Or is it shaping me to be more like Christ? And if it’s not doing the latter, cut it off.

Then, commit to *limiting* your freedom every Sunday, by coming to church, and mid-week by attending homegroup or Bible study, because that will be the antidote to loneliness, and give you the community that the bad news of individualism robs you of. And then allow Christ to shape you daily, through prayer and Bible reading, and immerse yourself in the good news of all that he is and all that he has done for you. And whom the Son sets free shall be free indeed.