

FELLOWSHIP OF GOD SERIES

CITIES OF REFUGE

Now in the second session here we want to look at how people backslide, why people backslide and how to preserve ourselves so that we don't backslide. How do the backsliding start and what we can do to prevent it from happening in the first place.

Turn to Numbers chapter 35 the cities of refuge. Verse 9-15 *And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel. When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there. The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgement. And the cities, which you give, shall be your cities of refuge. You shall give three cities beyond the Jordan, and three cities in the land of Canaan, to be cities of refuge. These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them, that any one who kills any person without intent may flee there.*

Six as we know is the number of sin. The cities of refuge are meant to protect the one who accidentally has killed another person. Suppose you were chopping wood but you were not diligent to take care of your tool. The axe head is loose and the axe head strikes a person's head and he dies. Let's say the person who was accidentally killed has a brother. Then his brother will come after you. You think, "Where do I go, where do I run?" God provided a city of refuge so that quickly, before his brother comes, before his avenger comes, he runs to that city for refuge. God provides a solution for this accidental death. You know why, if the avenger succeeds and kills the killer, that dead killer's brother may go after that avenger and you will have a never-ending story of bloodshed. In many places of the world you

find that continual hatred and war among tribes because of one killing. Sometimes that enmity goes on for generations. So God provides a solution to put a stop to that killing once and for all.

Now let us point to this fact here. The city of refuge is not a place for the guilty. In a sense the one who accidentally killed another is guilty. As sinners, everybody is guilty. But there are different degrees in which people go against God. Those who directly oppose God I don't think there is much solution. Those who choose to go against God in the book of Hebrews chapter 6 it says there is no repentance for them. Later on in the book of Hebrews it says that those who trample the Blood of Jesus under them there is no more room for them. So there is a group who is indeed guilty beyond redemption but it is very small and don't simply throw people into that group because there are not many people in that group. And don't use that passage wrongly to condemn people.

The vast majority, if I can use these words replacing the word ignorant with the word accidental, unknowingly, should know better but didn't know. When like chopping the wood and it falls and kill somebody else. Do you know that every sin you sin doesn't just hurt yourself. It hurts somebody else. Nobody sins alone. Even if you think you are alone, your sin may still affect your children and your loved ones. When we don't walk in God's perfect will somebody is being hurt. And the city of refuge will not protect those who murder, those who kill deliberately. The city of refuge is something God provided because of the imperfection of mankind.

Turn to Deut. 19:1-3 *"When the Lord your God cuts off the nations whose land the Lord your God gives you, and you dispossess them and dwell in their cities and in their houses, you shall set apart three cities for you in the land which the Lord your God gives you to possess. You shall prepare the roads and divide into three parts the area of the land which the Lord your God gives you as a possession, so that any manslayer can flee to them.*

Now here are more details in verse 3 God says that you must make roads for them, so that these roads lead to the city of refuge. In other words it's accessible for people to come to this city of refuge.

Then it says in verse 4 *and this is the case of the manslayer who flee there that he may live whoever kills his neighbor unintentionally, not having hated him in times past.* Now it will not protect someone who kills his or her neighbor intentionally.

Then in verse 6 *Lest the avenger of blood in hot anger pursue the manslayer and overtake him, because the way is long, and wound him mortally, though the man did not deserve to die, since he was not at enmity with his neighbor in time past. Therefore I command you, you shall set apart three cities.*

Why did God make a city of refuge? Everything in the Old Testament is a shadow of something in the new. The cities of refuge point to the believers the Christians. And every one of us who live our life right with God becomes like a city of refuge. A church in a sense and the fellowship becomes like a city of refuge and it protects people from some consequences of their life but not all. Let me point to some interesting types in the New Testament.

Lets look at II Cor. 5:18-21 *All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin that knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

In a sense we become ambassadors of God when we come into Jesus. In a sense individually we all have now a ministry of reconciliation. Then when we group together corporately there is a large covering.

Lets turn to I Cor. 5 there is a man here who is not living his life right.

I Cor. 5:1-5 It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present I have already pronounced judgement in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

That is an interesting passage. Paul here says that the person who is living among the must be separated, to use a strong word excommunicated. We know that the power to excommunicate someone has been abused and misused in church history. There are a lot of people who are excommunicated by the bad guy. The bad guy sometimes excommunicates the good guy, because the bad guy is on the chair. So every principle and every thing that is right can be abused. Lets look at it in this context here.

Lets say everything is running in order. The church of Jesus Christ is holy and all the right people are in place. And Paul here was overall advising the church and the church leaders who are all yielded to the Spirit of God. And there was one blot of sin in their midst. Paul says a strange thing. Paul says, "I want you to take him and deliver him to Satan." That puzzles many young Christians. What do you mean deliver him? Send that person as a present to Satan? What have we to do with Satan our archenemy?

Look at it in a different light. Behind this thing is an understanding that there is protection in the church. You must see the other side. What was happening is that there is an invisible protection round this person who is not living right. Somehow by coming into their midst, and being with them, he is protected and shielded from the onslaught of the devil. Now see the devil comes to steal, kill and destroy. Satan is very clever to give temptations on credit terms, which most people think was free. And after you have taken his goods you realize that he is now asking a heavy price for it. You have tasted of sin and he is coming after you.

Remember Satan never give anything free. Don't be deceived. He will ask for a price and the price is heavy which is paid by your blood. Anything that you take from the devil he will come and collect the wages and the payment for it. And you somehow are able to go into a place where Christians are. And while inside this place where lets say everyone is living right with God. Jesus said, "Where 2 or 3 are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them." Satan doesn't like to visit such a place. So he stays away from that place. He hangs outside looking for loopholes.

And of course the church is not just a place; the church is the people. And when we live our life right with God, the presence of God goes with us. And we are protected to a certain extend. The cities of refuge are Christians and we all are cities of refuge. And wherever we go if we walk in our life right with God there is shield of protection around us. You have to believe that you have the shield of protection around you. Remember the Armour of God and all those things protect you and are able to quench every dart of the enemy. If your shield of faith is up nothing touches you. Eph. 6 says that every fiery dart is quenched or removed by the shield of faith. So wherever you go you are protected.

And so this guy is living in sin and the devil is seeking to destroy all the time. Somehow he managed to always stay close to one of those Christians. Now normally I would be fine. But this guy is not repentant. And Paul understands all these things. And he says you should stop protecting this person from the judgement that is due on his life. He may encourage others to do the same thing. It is something that displeases God. Either this person repents or you cannot take him into your fellowship. And so Paul says deliver him off, surrender him. What they did was to come together and in agreement and Paul invoked the power of God. I know a lot of people who would love to do this thing but their motives are wrong.

Here it says in I Cor.5: 4 *In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ when you are gathered together along with my spirit with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ.* In other words there has to be an anointing. This power to deliver someone to Satan is not something you do by your emotions or just because you are upset. There has to be

an anointing of God. It has to be something ordained of God. And there has to be unity done in the name of Jesus. And what they did was to cut off the protection of the city of refuge that they were offering to this person. The moment this takes place Satan will go after this guy. He will have the just consequences of what he has and that he may realize his mistakes. Later on you read the same person repented.

Let me find a small secular illustration to this. Lets say there is someone who lives off Christian love and is always getting into debt. The creditors are coming after him. He runs to you and say please help me. Then you help him. And he is debt free again. So you go again to another moneylender. Then he got into another debt. Then he comes again to you. And you help him again. Then he goes to another moneylender. Who paid the judgement for him? You. That is hard earned money. Somebody worked, somebody earned and somebody paid. You never earn, you never work hard, somebody is working double hard just for you. Now if this goes on as a life style you become a moocher. I have experienced one that came many years back. This person is very experienced. This person came and borrowed 100 dollars. He paid that amount back. He then borrowed 3 hundred dollars and then paid back that amount. Finally he borrowed one thousand dollars and ran off and disappeared.

What is happening here? By Christians not standing up to their principles, they are propagating a life style and a sin that could have been easily removed. When the Christians stand up to the principles this person would have to pay the price for his sin. For the first time this person is made to work to repay his debt. And he may be renewed and changed. Let say a person is in sin and is somehow is not dealt with and is condoned. It may spread and before long everyone begin to accept the sin and that person is not facing that kind of judgement he should. Not that we all judge. None of us can play the judge or should play the judge. But what happens is that we should have no part in some things that are not of God. And that is the story of the cities of refuge that God has provided in this area.

Why do good things happen to bad people and why do bad things happen to good people? The answer is based on the cities of refuge. The bad people are sometimes blessed because of the good people with them. Lets say sometimes a company is not operating according to righteous principles but there are Christians inside there.

The Christians are the salt of the earth. God may bless that company not because of that proprietor but because the others that are involved there are living right for God.

Good things can happen to bad people because somehow the bad people are living under the good people. Good people somehow are holding the whole thing together. God is actually blessing the bad people because the salt of the earth in their midst is the preserving them from decay. Think about a person like Nebuchadnezzar who is a very wicked fellow. But God blessed him because of the Jews. Think about the Persian Empire at the time of Esther. Do you think God blessed that empire just because of the ungodly folks? No, it's because of God's people there. God is working out something to preserve the Jews. So sometimes the bad gets the side benefit of the good people who are there.

The reverse is also true. Why do bad things happen to good people? This is not the only reason. There are many other reasons. But one of the reasons is because the good people associate with the bad. Paul in I Cor. 5 advised the church to deal with the sinner very quickly or otherwise the whole church will be infested with that kind of immorality. If they don't deal with it then the entire church may be affected. Now it looks very hard it looks very cruel but it is required in order to preserve the holiness of the church.

Ps. 1:1 *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.* Do you know there are some places where you are not to sit and stand? There are some places you are not to walk in. Your blessings are depends also on your walk. You have no compromise with people or situation, which displease God. Sometimes God can protect you from a situation. Sometimes God protect you through a situation. Jesus can still a storm when you sail across it. Sometimes Jesus protects you through the shipwreck like the apostle Paul. But whatever it is you are protected. Sometimes as a city of refuge you could withstand different things.

But there are other times when God said have no part. You remember in the book of

Revelation the Lord said come out my people. So there is a time when nothing else protects. The city of refuge is in relationship to God. Now when something displeases God there is no protection. That is why in the wrath of the Lamb in the book of Revelation the sinners called on the mountain to cover them. Nothing can cover them; even the mountain could not help. Here God is saying that there are some situations where His wrath is at work. God is not obligated to protect the person who ignored His warnings to flee certain places.

Sometimes God can protect a city. Now Abraham was stretching his faith as much as he can to protect the city. Here are two opposing areas. If Abraham had come down to asking whether if there be one righteous person Sodom and Gomorrah may have been saved. Somehow his spiritual energy or prayer could not break through to that. He came to the minimum of 10 righteous persons. But there were not even 10 righteous persons. Do you notice the whole argument? If there were 10 righteous persons the thousands in Sodom and Gomorrah who were wicked would have been saved. Isn't that an amazing theology? It is the salt of the earth theology. If there were 10 righteous persons the city of Sodom and Gomorrah may have existed until today and they would still think they existed because they are very good not realizing that is because of those 10 righteous people. That is why some good things happen to bad people and they don't know it. Sometimes you see God blessing a company and you look at the boss, you find that he is a crook. But somewhere in the back room is a godly guy. And the godly guy is living his life for God and his living comes from that company and for his sake God blesses that company. Sodom and Gomorrah are full of crooks and God said if 10 righteous persons could be found He will preserve the 2 cities and the people would have been saved because of 10. Don't you think the power of the city of refuge is powerful?

However there is a line you do not cross. There are certain things that the city of refuge cannot go beyond. Even Abraham cannot go beyond. There were no more 10 righteous persons found and the whole cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is destined for judgement in the wrath of God. God sent 2 angels to take out Lot and his family. Lot's wife began to look back and she was turned into a pillar of salt. There is a line when God says, "No more, move out. You can't even put your feet there. If you put your feet there, your feet will turn into a pillar of salt."

Why and how do some people move into the direction of backsliding?

Let me point to reason No.1 Most people don't become enemies of God immediately. But the first prime reason that you have to answer in your life is who you fellowship with. We have to choose the kind and type of fellowship correctly. Even Jesus has different degrees of fellowship with different people. You have the multitudes. You have His disciples. You have His 12 apostles. You have His 3 apostles. And all of us would have fellowship with the whole body of Christ. And some contact with the world because of your responsibilities in this life and because you are evangelizing the world. But we need to understand the quality and the quantity of our fellowship. It depends very much on how we measure the scale of who we fellowship with. If you feel at home among those of the lowest kind no matter how spiritual you are you will be pulled down.

Paul in the book of Romans 16:17 *I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them.* Notice the word. He says avoid them. And there are many other passages like that where Paul even said don't even eat lunch with them. And John the apostle even warns not even to greet some of them. Now of course I know some people abuse this thing and they do it to every Tom, Dick and Harry, which is not correct. I always wonder how many Christians really treasure good fellowship. If I meet with a person who is very spiritual, I would really have a heart to heart fellowship with him. But with people that I sense are sometimes in the spirit and sometimes in the flesh, I would put my guard up. The thing about many people is that they don't have many guards. The city has no walls. They don't know how to put up different quality and quantity of the fellowship. And as a result every foul kind of creatures can just come in. There is no protection at all in their life. But the thing that we need to watch most is No. 1 the fellowship.

Do you know why the apostle Paul became an enemy of God? He hung around the wrong folks. His favorite folks were the Pharisees. From whom did he get the letters? Do you think that it is easy to get a letter of commendation from the Pharisees? No, you have to be close to someone in authority. If you read the life of

Paul you will realize that he was a Sanhedrin member. For example not every Tom, Dick and Harry here can probably go to a Governor and get a personal recommendation. And from there he got his letters and persecuted those Christians. He was hanging around the wrong folks. A good intelligent man like him can be thrown the other way. And there are many people who are good, intelligent, and smart, on the average they would not have done something. Because they keep hanging around the wrong folks and the wrong people, not knowing how to differentiate between good and bad quality fellowship, their minds are first affected and become unrenewed. Wrong thoughts, ideas and philosophy begin to draw you away. Your mind begins to be affected. Fellowship brings about emotional bonding. When you are emotionally bonded to people you tend to favor their views.

One top salesman wrote a book about achieving a million dollars sales. He says one of the things he cultivates was emotional bonding. This is not a principle for us to adopt since it is just a worldly principle. So when he goes to a family he would be nice to the children. But his motives are not just to be nice to them, but also to form an emotional bonding with that family. His reasoning is that if a customer has to choose between 2 salesmen he could buy from, he tends to buy from the one he knows. So he used these methods to his advantage. Emotional bonding takes place and that is No. 1.

No. 2 is mental consent. By not speaking out for our beliefs we become overwhelmed by the unbelief. That would be the mental consent being affected.

The third is attitudes, which is very dangerous. You pick up and you catch something, which are not taught. The mental consent develops through conversation. Emotional bonding arises after a time span in relationships. But the third attitude is something invisible that you just catch at the sub-conscious level. There are some things that are caught rather than taught. What happens if you are in the company of people with jeering attitudes? Even though you are someone who is very careful before long you adopt their jeering attitudes.

And the worse is step four. Your character becomes defiled and affected. You

become like them. Then the next area you began to do like what they do. You can trace it in the life of Paul. You can trace it in the life of king Saul.

The positive is also true. By having it the right way, the right fellowship, you get into the right type of vision, the right type of beliefs. And you began to get the right attitudes towards different things. And you began to have a character like those people who are holy. And you began to do the right thing. Positive or negative it also works the same way.